



FROZEN
PEAK

THE MOUNTAIN MAN'S

Forbidden Love

CLARA KING

The Mountain Man's Forbidden Love

(Crave County: Frozen Peak)

Clara King

Notices

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About

I shouldn't want Emily Wilde.

She's young and sweet with a sunshine smile and a sassy smart mouth that has me hooked.

I'm a grumpy mountain man mechanic who's way too old for her...and I'm also her dad's best friend.

I know that Emily is totally off-limits, and my best friend will never forgive me if he finds out how I feel about his daughter.

But I can't get this gorgeous curvy girl off my mind.

I've never felt so possessive, and I want her to be mine once and for all.

Our age gap love might be forbidden, but you know what they say about forbidden fruit...

It always tastes the sweetest.

Welcome to Frozen Peak! This snowy mountain in Crave County is full of rugged alpha mountain men who are crazy about the curvy women they love. You can expect big grumpy heroes, sassy sunshine heroines, age gap romance galore, and enough steam to melt all the snow off this mountain! Each book in the Crave County universe can be read as a standalone.

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Axel

It's an icy February morning as I drive down the mountain, making the short trip into Winterdale. It's the same route I take every morning, winding past the snow-capped fir trees and the frozen lake toward the garage where I work as a mechanic. But every morning, without fail, I make a stop first at Sweet Tooth Bakery, a quaint little store just across from the garage. They do a mean cup of coffee and the best red velvet cake in the county, but it's sure not the cakes that have me coming back here every day at 8 a.m. sharp.

I park in my usual space outside the bakery and head for the entrance, my heart pounding with anticipation. I keep my face neutral, like always, but I swear I can feel my heartbeat in my ears as I shoulder open the door and walk into the warm bakery. It's quaint and cozy with its wooden beams and delicious-looking cakes, but I hardly notice the food or the décor. My eyes are fixed on the angel behind the counter.

Emily.

She looks up at me when she hears the door open, her face breaking into a smile. God, I love that smile. I love everything about her. She looks so beautiful in her little apron: it stretches over her curvy body, making my mouth water every time I look at her. Her chocolate-brown doe eyes sparkle as she looks at me, and her full, pink lips look even more kissable than usual this morning. Curly strands of dark hair caress her cheeks, spilling out of her messy bun, and there's a smudge of flour on her nose.

Perfect.

My body instantly reacts to the sight of her, and I feel pure desire stirring in my stomach, blood rushing down toward my cock, making me feel hot and frustrated with need. It's getting pretty fucking predictable since I've been having the same

reaction to her every day for the past nine months, ever since she got back from college. But along with my aching want comes the familiar prickle of guilt. I swallow it down and head up to the counter, keeping my face impassive. She can never know what she does to me. I need to keep it to myself.

“Good morning, Axel!” Emily says, her face bright like she’s happy to see me.

“Morning.”

I try to return her smile, but it feels more like a grimace. I’m hopeless at acting natural around her; I’m too busy trying to push down my urges and block out the dirty thoughts that fill my mind every time I look at her. Luckily, she never seems to mind my grumpy mood.

“Do you want the usual?” she asks.

I nod curtly and she sets about making me an espresso. I watch her work, my eyes lingering on her smooth, creamy skin and the way that little apron is tight across her wide hips. When she bends over to reach for a coffee cup, I get an eyeful of her plump, round ass, and I blink hard, running an agitated hand through my hair.

Fuck, why do I torture myself like this every day?

“Did you have a good weekend?” she calls to me over the sound of the espresso machine.

I shrug. “Quiet.”

She nods and leans across the counter, raising a teasing eyebrow as she says, “My weekend was great! Since you didn’t ask.” My lips tug into a slight smile, and she beams at me. “Wow, did I just make Axel Dean smile? Somebody call the Crave County Gazette!”

I roll my eyes, but inside my heart is pounding. She hands me my coffee and our hands touch, her soft skin brushing against my rough, calloused palms. I clear my throat, trying to regain my composure as I ask, “You ever gonna outgrow that smart mouth of yours?”

She chuckles. “Never. I’ll still be teasing you when you’re old and gray.”

“I’m already old and gray.”

Emily rolls her eyes. “No, you’re not. Besides, the gray hairs suit you. Silver foxes are all the rage right now.”

My lip twitches upward at the compliment. My hair is mostly dark still, but now that I’m in my forties, the streaks of gray are becoming more noticeable. Even my beard is threaded with silver. I’m glad Emily appreciates it, but it also reminds me of how young she is, and the guilt I buried before comes rising up again. I hand over the money for my coffee, avoiding her gaze. I’m convinced she’ll see the longing in my eyes if I look at her again. My poker face is good, but it’s not that damn good.

“Did you want anything else?” Emily asks, watching me. “Norma is making brownies in the back. They’ll be ready soon if you want one.”

I shake my head. “I’m good. Thanks for the coffee.”

I start to walk away and Emily’s voice starts to sound more insistent. “Are you sure? Do you think my dad will want anything?”

I stop walking, turning my head back slightly but not looking at her. “If Gregor wants something, he can come get it himself.”

“Whatever you say, grumpy,” Emily says. I hear the smile in her voice, but I’m not smiling. The mention of Gregor has soured the moment, and I head out of the bakery with a quick wave of my hand, not looking back.

I take a scalding sip of coffee, ignoring the way the liquid burns my tongue as I cross the street to Wilde’s Garage. Working only a stone’s throw away from Emily sure doesn’t help my situation, and I spend most of my time at the garage trying to avoid glancing toward the bakery.

I head in through the open doors and head into the backroom, pulling on my coveralls just as Gregor comes in.

“You’re very nearly late,” he says, reaching out and grabbing my espresso before taking a sip. “Guess you went over to the bakery?”

I glare at him, but my heart’s not in it. “Yeah, I wanted an espresso. If you want one, go get your own, asshole.” I grab the drink back from him and finish it in one last gulp before throwing the cup in the trash.

“You’re touchy this morning,” Gregor says, reaching past me to grab a wrench off the wall. “Makes a difference, since you’re usually so cheery and upbeat.”

I snort at his sarcasm and give him a friendly shove on the shoulder. “You’re not exactly a ray of sunshine yourself.”

“Yeah, yeah. Stop your yapping and get to work.”

I do as he says, chuckling quietly to myself as I grab my tools and start working on an old Cadillac. It needs new brake pads and a replacement oil filter, and the job is sure to keep me occupied for a while. I can see Gregor out of the corner of my eye getting started on his own project, and I feel the sinking guilt in the pit of my stomach again.

Gregor Wilde has been my best friend for the past fifteen years. Ever since my first day working at his repair shop, Gregor and I have been buddies. We understand each other. Our friendship mostly consists of joking around and making fun of each other, but it also runs a lot deeper than that. When I lost my dad a few years ago, Gregor got me through it. When his wife left him ten years ago, I was there for him, taking on his jobs and doing my best to help him out. We’re not exactly open about our feelings, but I know how much our friendship means to both of us. I’ve always been a loner, preferring my own company. It’s the main reason I bought my cabin on Frozen Peak in the first place: I wanted the solitude, the wilderness, nothing but me and the mountains. I never expected to make a buddy...a real buddy, somebody I trusted and cared about. And that’s why I can barely look at Gregor some days. Because if he knew how I felt about Emily...his only daughter...fuck, I can’t even imagine how mad he’d be.

How upset and betrayed he'd feel. He'd probably want to strangle me, and honestly, I wouldn't blame him.

I didn't always feel this way for Emily. When she left for college at eighteen, she was still just my buddy's kid. I looked at her and saw a little girl. Then, nine months ago, she came back after graduation and moved back into her dad's cabin. And from the moment I saw her again, I knew everything had changed in those four years. She wasn't some little kid anymore. She was a grown woman. A gorgeous, curvy beauty who stirred up feelings in me that I'd never felt before.

From beside the Cadillac, I peer out of the open garage doors and toward the bakery, my eyes gazing through the window, hoping to see a glimpse of Emily. But the morning sun is glaring against the glass, and all I can see is the reflection of the garage in the bakery window.

It's torture to be so close. To want her so much and to know I can't have her. Even if she wasn't twenty years younger than me, she's my best friend's daughter. She's sweet and innocent and beautiful, and she'll never be mine.

Gritting my teeth and looking away from the bakery, I sigh frustratedly and get back to work, my mind still full of Emily Wilde's perfect smile.

Emily

I stare out of the window, watching the garage across the street from my place behind the bakery counter. I can see my dad from here, working on some kind of vintage model, but it's not him I'm looking for. It's Axel. It's hard to see him from where I'm standing, but occasionally I get a glimpse of his hulking frame in his navy-blue coveralls, striding around the garage holding shiny tools in his large hands. When the bakery is quiet, like today, I spend whole hours just staring toward the garage, my mind running away with crazy fantasies about Axel Dean. I imagine him striding across the street toward the bakery, his eyes wild, his coveralls stained with grease as he barges inside and sweeps me up into his arms. Then suddenly the scene changes and we're in my bedroom, his strong hands peeling off my clothes, his deep blue eyes burning with lust as his fingers reach lower and lower and lower—

“Emily! The brownies are ready,” I hear Norma call from the kitchen, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Okay, coming!” I call back to her, trying to ignore how hot and bothered I feel.

I head into the kitchen and grab the plate of warm brownies from Norma, moaning at the delicious chocolaty scent.

“There should be plenty there,” Norma says, giving me a quick pat on the shoulder. “I've got to take Jake to the dentist. You'll be fine here, won't you?”

“Sure.”

I give her a reassuring smile and she thanks me before hurrying out of the bakery, leaving me alone. Norma owns this place, and her cakes are out of this world, but she's a busy lady, and on quieter days she usually leaves me in charge of things. I don't mind. I love my job here—it's cozy and warm,

and I get to spend plenty of time reading romance novels when there are no customers to serve. Winterdale is a pretty small mountain town right in the middle of Crave County, and it's not touristy like some places, so the bakery is usually pretty quiet outside of lunchtime hours. It also means I get plenty of time to lose myself in my daydreams of Axel, delighting in the fact that he's somewhere over in my dad's garage just across the street from me.

I've had a crush on Axel since I knew crushes were a thing. When I was younger, I saw him as this big grizzly mountain man with sparkling blue eyes and a bushy beard, living in a cabin just like my dad's, but even further up the mountain, right among the wild ridges and the fir trees. It was always just a silly crush, but everything changed when I came back from college. Suddenly, it didn't feel so silly anymore. It felt all-consuming. Every time I see Axel, I feel like my body is full of bees, buzzing inside my skin, making me thrum with energy. I try not to let my feelings show...instead, I try to act natural, teasing him and acting like we're just friends. Because as much as I want Axel, I can never have him. He's my dad's best friend, and I could never betray my dad that way. He's suffered enough betrayal already. My mom left him for another guy when I was twelve, abandoning us to start a new family. As far as she was concerned, we were just something to be upgraded for a newer model, like one of the old beat-up cars in my dad's garage. Ever since then, I'm all my dad has, apart from Axel. We're the two people he cares about most in the world, and I know he'd be heartbroken if we betrayed him. Not that Axel would ever see me that way. To him, I'll always just be his friend's kid: the chubby little girl with the smart mouth who serves him his morning coffee and teases him about his grumpiness. That's all I am, and as much as it hurts, it's all I can ever be.

The door to the bakery opens, making me jump. For a second, I imagine that it's Axel, but I'm disappointed when Mike Payne walks in. Instinctively, I cringe as he starts to walk toward me. I went to high school with Mike, and he was always a bit of a creep with girls. Now that he's in his twenties, not much has changed: his eyes always seem to be

leering. He's been coming into the bakery a lot lately, and I privately wish he'd find somewhere else to buy his coffee and cake.

"Good morning, my lovely Emily," he says in his oily voice.

I force a smile. "Good morning."

"Be a good girl and get me a flat white and one of those brownies, would ya?"

I'll get you anything you want if I never have to hear you say the words "good girl" to me ever again, I think bitterly, grabbing a pair of plastic tongs and transferring a warm brownie into a to-go box before turning on the coffee machine.

I avoid Mike's gaze as the machine crackles and drips, but I can feel him staring at me, his eyes hungry. I feel like I'm nothing more than one of the cakes in the display case...like he's deciding whether he wants a slice of me or not. The thought makes me squirm with discomfort.

"Here you go," I say, handing him his brownie and coffee. "That'll be five dollars and fifty-nine cents."

He hands over a ten-dollar bill, his hand lingering against mine. I pull it away.

"Thanks," he says, pocketing the change that I hand to him. "Now let me see that beautiful smile before I go."

I stare at him blankly. "What?"

"Come on," he cajoles. "You know you want to."

My skin crawls at the way he's looking at me.

"If I smile at you, will you leave?" I ask.

Mike forces a laugh, but there's no humor in his eyes. "Playing hard to get. I like that. Sure, I'll go if you give me a smile."

Reluctantly, I smile, baring my teeth at him. It doesn't reach my eyes. I hope it looks like a snarl.

"There we are," he says, his eyes raking over my body as he steps back from the counter. "Good girl."

“You said you’d leave.”

Another forced laugh.

“Okay, I’m going!” he heads for the door and turns back with a wink. “See you tomorrow, pretty lady.”

I shudder as he leaves the bakery, wishing I’d spat in his flat white. He’s always been weird, but this is the first time he’s been so obvious about it. Feeling grossed out, I look back toward the garage, hoping to see Axel. I’ve never seen Axel with a woman or a girlfriend before, but I know for damn sure he’d never talk to a woman like that, especially when she was so clearly not into it. My eyes scan the garage and my heart thuds as I see him. He’s standing beside the Cadillac he’s working on looking right at the bakery. I know he can’t see me through the window, but still, somehow it feels like he’s looking right into my eyes.

Axel

I'm watching the bakery, looking for a glimpse of Emily as usual, when I see Mike Payne leaving with a sly smirk on his face. My fists clench as I watch him walk away, and I feel something fierce and angry pulse through my veins, continuing long after he's out of sight. I've seen a lot of Mike Payne lately, coming and going at the bakery. I don't know him well, but he came in a few months back to get his car fixed, so I know his name. Like me, I have a feeling Mike isn't just going to Sweet Tooth Bakery for the coffee. Thinking of him going in there to talk to Emily makes me want to punch a hole in something, and I kick at the leg of my workbench, breathing hard as the tools all shake and clang together.

Of course, Emily would go for a guy like Mike. He's in his twenties, age-appropriate instead of old enough to be her damn father like I am. I've never seen Emily with a guy or heard about any boyfriends, but it's only a matter of time before some douche young guy will want to claim those gorgeous curves. I can just picture it now, Emily and Mike: a couple. I can almost see his lips on hers, his hands touching my girl. *My girl.*

"Everything okay, bud?"

Gregor's voice brings me back to reality and I tear my gaze from the bakery, turning to look at him. He's frowning at me, still holding a wrench in one hand.

"I'm fine."

I turn away from him and try to look focused on the Cadillac, but Gregor knows me too well.

"Listen," he says, sitting down on a stool in front of my workbench, "I know you're always a grumpy asshole, but lately you seem like something's really bothering you. I know

we like to talk shit to each other, but you know I'm here for you, right?"

I soften slightly at his words, turning toward him and slapping him affectionately on the shoulder. "I know. And I appreciate it. Same goes for you."

Silently, I'm relieved that Gregor hasn't noticed my strange mood coincides with the day Emily came home from college nine months ago. I still remember heading over to Gregor's cabin, knocking on the door, and then...there she was. This gorgeous angel, grinning at me.

"Axel!" she cried when she saw me. "Hi!"

I almost didn't recognize her. She was barely eighteen when she left for college, an awkward kid with streaky green hair, short and choppy, her face still so childlike and her body drowning in oversized band t-shirts. Now here she was, a twenty-two-year-old woman, confident and self-assured with a thick, curvy figure, glossy brown hair, and the brightest eyes I'd ever seen.

It was almost impossible to act natural, but I did my best, making small talk about her time at college and her friends. The thought of her being with college boys stirred something animal in me, something wild and full of rage, and it's a feeling that's always there, simmering under the surface every time I see another guy near Emily.

"So," Gregor continues, "you gonna tell me what's weighing on you or not?"

Your daughter, I think. Your gorgeous, perfect daughter. I'm obsessed with her, and I can't have her. And it's driving me fucking crazy.

"Nothing," I say instead. "I'm fine."

Gregor shrugs, his disbelief evident. "If you say so."

He walks away and I get back to work, trying to drown out the thoughts of Emily and Mike with the sound of my hammer. It doesn't work.

Emily

It's already dark out when I leave the bakery just after five. I took my time getting everything cleared up, but as I step out in the freezing cold February air, I wish I'd left sooner. It's almost pitch black out here. I wrap my scarf tighter around my neck and start walking toward my car when I stop, my heart thudding in my chest. The street is quiet, and my dad's garage is shut up for the day, but I can feel something. Someone's eyes on me.

My skin crawls as I look back toward the bakery, and I swear I can see something moving in the darkness...a figure prowling about in the shadows. Ice-cold fear dances up my spine. I don't waste a second. I rush for my car and close the door behind me, locking myself inside. Instinctively, I look behind me at the backseat, but there's nobody there.

Of course there's nobody there. This isn't a horror movie.

I chance a look back at the bakery, peering out through the car window, but everything looks still once more. I want to think I was imagining things, but I know for sure that someone was there. I could feel it.

Feeling spooked, I begin the drive back to my dad's cabin, my mind still fixating on the figure in the shadows. It could have been anybody. Somebody walking their dog or standing outside for a cigarette, who knows? Nothing to be scared of. But still, my stomach churns with unease.

I wish Axel was here.

The thought comes out of nowhere, but Axel is often the first person I think of when I'm feeling nervous or worried. He makes me feel so safe. His bulging muscles could probably protect me from anything. I can just imagine a huge truck driving straight into him: Axel would be unscathed, while the

truck would be just a crushed hunk of metal. Like the Hulk or something.

Okay, maybe that's going a bit far...

I'm so consumed in my thoughts that I don't even realize I've reached the stoplight. I come back to my senses a second too late.

CRASH.

I gasp as I slam into the truck in front of me. My body flings forward and then backward, the car gradually shuddering to a halt. I'm panting with shock, staring at the rear of the truck ahead. The bumper looks a little crumpled, but otherwise okay. I flex my fingers and wriggle my body, but aside from a tiny twinge of pain in my neck, everything seems normal.

God, I'm an idiot.

Tentatively, I reach out to open my door, ready to get out and face the music. The truck driver does the same, and I see a hulking figure slamming the door shut, striding toward me. My stomach plummets, but then the figure is illuminated by my headlights and I could almost cry with relief.

Axel.

He recognizes me at the same time I recognize him, and his expression changes from irked to concerned. He hurries toward me and I open my car door, the frigid air rushing in.

"I'm so sorry—" I begin.

"Shit, Emily, are you okay?"

Axel is looking at me wide-eyed, and before I know what's happening, his hands are on me, examining my face, looking into my eyes, checking for cuts, bruises, broken bones. My breath catches as his huge hands inspect me, and I shiver slightly beneath his touch.

"I'm fine! Really, I'm okay. I wasn't going fast: the airbags didn't even go off." Axel glares at my steering wheel like he's pissed at the airbag, and I almost laugh. "I'm really sorry, Axel. I should have been paying more attention. Your truck..."

Now that he can see I'm okay, Axel's fear seems to melt into anger.

"Screw the truck, Emily, you could have gotten yourself killed! What the hell were you thinking, not stopping?"

I press my lips together, shame flooding me. "I'm really sorry, Axel. I'm an idiot. I'll pay for the damage."

He waves me off. "I told you, screw the truck. I don't want your money. I'm pissed off that you got yourself into an accident. Imagine if you'd been driving faster—"

He cuts off with a hoarse groan, and runs a hand through his hair, his eyes burning with anger and worry and all kinds of emotions I can't even begin to decipher. I feel so guilty for rear-ending him, but damn, the way he's looking at me is replacing my shame with pure desire, leaving room for nothing else. I've always loved Axel's protective nature, and seeing him look at me with so much emotion is making my heart thud in my chest.

I don't want him to stop looking at me like that. Not ever.

Axel

I have to force myself to breathe as I try to get my head around what just happened. It was a shock when I felt my truck jerk forward, and I was pissed off that somebody had hit me, but when I got out of my car and saw Emily sitting behind the wheel looking wide-eyed and scared, my anger was replaced with total fear.

Fuck, what if she'd hurt herself? I can't even think about it.

Now that she's told me she's okay, I'm torn between being worried about her anyway and being mad as hell that she wasn't being more careful. I don't know what I would do if something happened to her.

"Axel, I promise I'm fine," Emily assures me. "And I promise I'll be more careful. I'm sorry, I was distracted, I was thinking about..." She cuts off. "Were you hanging around the bakery earlier?"

Her question throws me. "What? When?"

"Like five minutes ago, just as I was leaving?"

I shake my head. "No, I left the garage and got straight in my car. Why do you ask?"

She presses her lips together, frowning. "No reason. It was probably nothing."

Her expression is hard to read, and I don't think she's telling me everything, but at that moment there's the sound of a loud honking coming from behind us. There's a car waiting behind Emily's, and it seems to rouse her from her thoughts.

"Crap. I need to get out of the road..." she says.

"You're not going anywhere in that car until I've checked it for damage. I'm taking it straight over to the garage and looking at it tomorrow." She opens her mouth to say

something, but I put my hand up. “Don’t even think about trying to argue with me, Emily. I’m still mad as hell.”

She clamps her mouth shut and nods. “Okay. Thank you, Axel.”

I gesture at the waiting car to give us a second before I guide Emily to a space just off the road. She follows me in her car, and once we’re out of the way of oncoming traffic, I get out of my truck.

“Get in,” I tell her, opening my passenger-side door. “I’ll take you home.”

She does as she’s told before I drive her car the short distance back to the garage, parking it out front and running back to my truck where Emily’s waiting for me. I close the door behind us.

Emily is sitting quietly, looking like a scolded kid. It’s not often she’s quiet. Usually, she’s always got some smart-mouth comment to make about something. We drive in silence for a little while, turning right after the stoplight and heading up the mountain path toward her dad’s cabin. It’s making something stir in my chest, being this close to her. Seeing her riding shotgun in my truck as if she belongs in here with me...as if she’s really mine.

“I meant what I said, you know,” Emily pipes up, her voice soft. “I’ll pay to fix the damage to your truck. It’s the least I can do. I feel awful about it.”

I don’t waste a second before replying, “And I meant what I said. I’m not taking a dime. Just promise you’ll be more careful.”

She nods solemnly. “I promise. Are you going to tell my dad?”

I almost smile at the question. Even now she’s grown, Emily’s still worried about upsetting her dad.

“He’ll see your car at the garage. He’ll want to know what happened.”

Emily sighs deeply. “I’m going to be in such deep shit.”

“Have you ever been in an accident before?” I ask, following the twisting mountain path, determined to keep my eyes on the road and not on the gorgeous girl beside me.

I can't afford to be a hypocrite when I'm lecturing her about dangerous driving.

“Never,” she says. “I’m usually really careful. I was just distracted.”

Her words make me think back to what she was saying before, asking me whether I’d been outside.

“What distracted you?” I ask. “Did something happen when you left the bakery?”

Emily shakes her head. “It’s dumb. I thought I saw somebody, that’s all. Watching me. It creeped me out, but it was probably nothing. Just a dog walker or something.”

Her words make me nervous. My head automatically fills with a million possibilities, all of them bad. When it comes to Emily’s safety, I’d rather be safe than sorry.

“Any idea who it could have been?” I ask, trying to keep my voice neutral.

She shrugs. “Like I said, it was probably nothing.”

She doesn’t seem totally convinced, and I quietly resolve to keep a closer eye on her. I’ll wait at the garage and watch from across the street every night until I see that she’s safely in her car. No doubt she’ll notice my increased surveillance, but I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her safe, and I’m not giving her any choice in the matter.

* * *

We arrive outside Gregor’s cabin, and I stop the truck. It’s dead silent without the hum of the engine, and the air is thick with tension. I don’t want Emily to leave. I want to keep driving up the mountain until we reach my cabin. I want to carry her inside, bridal style, as if she’s really my girl. My wife.

“Thank you, Axel,” Emily says, looking over at me. “For bringing me back and for...well, everything tonight really. I’m

so sorry again.”

She looks so sweet and earnest that I want to pull her close and tell her it’s okay. That I forgive her. But instead, I just nod. “That’s alright. Just be careful, okay?”

She nods. “Okay.”

There’s a moment of silence, but Emily doesn’t get out of the truck. She sits, staring at her feet, and once again I’m struck by how different she’s acting from usual. Normally she’d be teasing me by now, calling me grumpy for getting mad at her driving, acting like a brat just to rile me up. But she’s quiet. Serious.

“I worry about you, you know,” I say. I don’t know where the words come from, but damn, it’s the truth.

She looks at me then, her eyes finding mine, the car light making the brown of her irises look almost gold.

“You do?” she asks tentatively.

The air is sizzling with electricity as we stare at each other, and I can feel my breathing coming faster as I lose myself in those pretty eyes.

“All the damn time,” I mutter.

It’s as close to a confession as I can bear to make, and I see Emily’s eyes fill with raw longing. It makes my pulse quicken to see her looking at me like that...like she wants me too...like I’m more than just her dad’s friend, some old grumpy guy who she considers to be a kind of father figure. Before I can dwell on it anymore, Emily leans across and kisses me hard on the mouth, her soft lips warm against mine. I want to fucking pinch myself. I feel her fingers on my cheeks, my beard, lips parting, her warm mouth open against mine, the sweet taste of cake frosting, the tentative probing of her tongue. My cock is swelling by the second, blood rushing downward as she moans into my mouth, her hands moving down to my shoulders, gripping me hard.

Then, all too soon, it’s over. She pulls away, her lips looking red and tender, and her eyes wide with shock. My heart is

smashing against my rib cage as we look at each other, and before I can say a word, Emily scrambles out of the car.

“I have to go,” she says. “My dad—he’ll be waiting for me—I...thanks for the ride, Axel.” She closes the door and runs toward the cabin, hurrying inside without a second glance.

I sit there for a while, breathing hard and trying to ignore the painful hardness in my pants. Through a gap in the curtains, I can see into the cabin. Gregor is sitting in his usual chair holding a glass of what I assume is his favorite whiskey. A shadow crosses the window, and I know it’s Emily going inside. I see Gregor smiling when he sees her. I see them hug. And I think back to this afternoon when my best buddy saw I was feeling down and told me he was there for me. Told me he had my back.

Now I’ve kissed his daughter.

Guilt wells up inside me as I pull away from their cabin and head up the mountain path toward my own, shutting myself inside. I get a fire going before collapsing onto the couch with a groan, feeling like an asshole. I know I shouldn’t have done it. I should have resisted: told her no. But kissing her felt so amazing. That sweet mouth pressed against mine, her little moans of satisfaction...it was fucking perfect. Part of me regrets it. I’ve betrayed my best friend. I’ve crossed the line and there’s no going back from what I did. But another part of me wants nothing more than to kiss her again. To touch her, taste her, make her mine in every way...and right now, that part of me is winning.

Emily

It's been a week since I kissed Axel, and I haven't stopped thinking about it once. It was even better than I imagined it would be: his lips bruising mine, his beard against my chin, the pulsing need in the air between us. When I got home that night, I went straight to my bedroom and touched myself, desperately trying to ease the aching between my legs, the need for Axel to claim me completely. But if anything, the longing has only intensified.

Even though my body has been restless since the moment my lips touched his, part of me feels like I dreamed up the whole thing. The morning after we kissed, Axel came into the bakery like every other day and ordered his usual espresso. It was like nothing had happened. Neither of us mentioned the kiss, and aside from our banter sounding a little more strained than usual, it was like nothing had changed. But for me, everything has changed. I've never felt so alive, so full of energy. Every time I see him, I feel my heart crashing against my rib cage like it wants to escape my chest and reach Axel. The tension when he walks into the bakery each morning is unbearable, and I'm struggling to tease him nonchalantly the way I used to. But by far the most difficult problem is that I've never felt so damn horny. I thought I knew what it meant to feel desire, but damn, I was wrong. Axel has awakened something inside me, and I'm fantasizing nonstop about the way it would feel to have his cock buried inside me, pounding me mercilessly. I've never had sex before. Axel is the only man I've ever thought of in that way, and I feel like he's turned me into nothing but a horny puddle of mush.

The door to the bakery opens, letting in a blast of cold air, and immediately I snap back to my senses.

Axel?

I can't help it. Every time the door opens, I pray it's him. But I groan internally when I see Mike Payne stride in, looking at me with that creepy smirk that's always playing on his face.

"Hey, beautiful."

I stiffen at his words. "What can I get you?"

Mike stops in front of the counter, leaning forward on it so he's uncomfortably close to me. It's barely noon but he already smells strongly of alcohol and instinctively I take a step back from him.

"Hmm..." Mike says, perusing the menu up on the wall behind my head. "Maybe some red velvet cake...or a cinnamon roll...or how about a slice of you?"

I raise an eyebrow. "What?"

"A slice of you," he repeats with a grin. "You look damn good enough to eat in that little apron of yours."

I flinch, not hiding the disgust on my face as I draw myself to my full height and say with as much force as I can muster, "This really has to stop, Mike."

His smile wavers. "What has to stop?"

I sigh, drawing my arms protectively across my chest. I'm so uncomfortable, but I have to deal with this guy once and for all. I only wish I didn't have to do it alone.

God, I wish Axel was here.

"You hitting on me," I say. "Making inappropriate comments. I'm not interested in you like that."

Mike's face twists into a sneer and he takes a step back from the counter. I can see the hurt pride in his eyes, mixed with anger.

"Who says I'm interested in you?" he snaps.

I frown at his tone. "I just assumed from all the remarks... but hey, if you're not interested in me, that's great! It means there are no hurt feelings. All I'm asking now is that you stop with the comments."

“I was just complimenting you,” Mike spits. “It’s called being friendly, you dumb bitch.”

His tone makes my pulse quicken with a mixture of nerves and anger, but I try to keep my voice level. “I need you to leave, Mike.” I take a step toward the door to the backroom, ready to run if I need to. “Just go.”

Mike’s eyes are full of rage, and I’m relieved to hear the door to the bakery open as another customer enters. But I keep my eyes fixed on Mike, like he’s a rabid animal about to bite me at any second.

“Whatever, chill out, I’m going.” He takes a step back and scowls at me like a petulant teenager. “And for the record, I was just being *nice*. I’m not into fat chicks, especially bitchy ones who can’t take a compliment.”

“What the fuck did you just say to her?”

The deep voice startles me, and I look toward the door, gasping when I see Axel standing there in his oil-stained coveralls, his eyes fixed on Mike. I’ve never seen him look so angry before. It’s radiating off him in waves, filling the whole bakery with wild, dangerous energy.

Crap, I hope they’re not going to fight...judging by the way Axel’s looking at Mike right now, he’s going to end up in jail for murder.

Axel

I've never felt so pissed off in my life. My fists are clenched, and every instinct is telling me to beat this guy's ass until he can't fucking walk. How dare he talk about my girl like that? Even if she's not my girl...can never be my girl...it makes no difference. I won't let any man disrespect her like that, especially not some sleazy little punk like Mike Payne-in-the-fucking-ass.

Mike whips around at the sound of my voice, and I can see him sizing me up. I'm a full head taller than him, and apprehension dawns on his face. He knows he could never beat me in a fight, but this asshole just won't quit.

"What's it to you, old man?" he says, his voice wobbling slightly. "Mind your own damn business."

I take a step toward him, my head pounding with rage.

"It became my business the second you disrespected Emily." My voice is nothing but a low growl, and I see Mike eyeing the exit behind me like he's about to make a run for it. But at the last minute, he seems to change his mind, desperate to save his pride.

Fucking idiot.

"Why are you so mad, dude?" he says, throwing back his shoulders, trying to look taller. "You're old enough to be her damn father."

I see red. I cross the bakery in two strides and swing my arm back, ready to punch this asshole in his pathetic face, when a cry from the counter stops me.

"No!" Emily cries. "Don't, Axel. He's not worth it."

Her sweet voice cuts a hole in my anger, and I look down at Mike. He's cowering with his hands over his face.

As if that could protect him.

“He deserves to have his ass kicked,” I tell her. “He can’t speak to you like that and get away with it.”

Emily nods. “I know. But I don’t want you to get in trouble for hitting him.” She turns her gaze to Mike. “You’re banned from the bakery, and if you ever try to come back here, I’ll call Axel, and next time I won’t stop him from teaching you a lesson about disrespecting women. Got it?”

Mike glares at me, then at Emily, but he nods.

“Now get out of here,” I snarl. “Before I change my mind and break your fucking face.”

With a final look at my balled fists, Mike hurries out of the bakery, red-cheeked and fuming with his tail between his legs. He slams the door, and part of me wants nothing more than to follow him outside and give him what he deserves. But I don’t want to leave Emily, so I stay where I am, watching her.

“Thank you, Axel,” she says eventually once the shock of the confrontation has worn off. “I’m so glad you showed up when you did.”

I shrug off her thanks. If anything, it’s Mike who should be thanking *her* for stopping me from punching his lights out.

“Is this the first time he’s disrespected you like that?” I ask, approaching the counter, adrenaline still pounding through me.

Emily frowns. “He’s been hanging around the bakery a lot lately, making comments and hitting on me. I tried to make it clear that I wasn’t into it, but this is the first time I told him openly to cut it out. As you can see, he didn’t appreciate that very much.”

I shake my head, filled with disgust and fury at the thought of that asshole sniffing around Emily, ignoring her discomfort, then insulting her when she finally told him to stop, his fragile ego unable to handle reality.

“Guys like that make me sick,” I say, my jaw clenched tight. “They’re weak. Pathetic. I won’t let him come near you ever again.”

“Thank you.” She smiles at me weakly, then seems to realize something, her eyes widening. “You know, I think it might have been him outside the bakery the night I crashed the car. I’ve thought about it, and I’m certain someone was watching me.”

Her words hit me like a punch in the gut. Not only does the thought of Mike following her around make me want to never let her out of my sight again, but the reminder of that night brings the memory of her lips on mine crashing back to me. I’ve been thinking of that kiss on repeat all week. It’s made me sloppy at work, and it’s given me a hard-on that no amount of jerking off will satisfy. The confrontation with Mike is the first time all week that I’ve thought about something other than Emily’s sweet mouth, the taste of her raspberry chapstick, the feel of her hands gripping me tightly, her soft moans against my lips...

“Axel?”

Her voice brings me back to reality and I come back to myself, my cock straining hard against my boxers.

“Sorry,” I say. “Listen, don’t worry about Mike, okay? I’ll take care of you.”

“I know you will. I’m not worried.” Emily smiles at me, her eyes bright. “Anyway, uh, did you want to order something? I don’t usually see you here at this time.”

“Uh...” I scan the menu quickly. “Yeah, I was in the mood for a bagel.”

It’s obviously a lie, and not a very convincing one either. The truth is, I had to see her again. Only seeing her once in the morning when I get my daily espresso just isn’t enough for me anymore. I want to see her all the time. Every damn day. Even if things can’t go any further between us, I can’t stop myself from wanting to be around her. Even if it’s just for a couple of minutes while I order a coffee or a bagel.

“Sure. I’ll get you a bagel. On the house. It’s the least I can do after you scared Mike away.” I open my mouth to argue but she raises a hand. “Nope, don’t bother Axel. I insist.”

She hands me a bagel, and I thank her.

“See you tomorrow,” I say.

“Yeah...see you.”

She looks disappointed. I don't want to leave, but I can't think of any other excuse to stay, and I know Gregor will be waiting for me to get back to work. I head for the door. My hand is resting on the handle when something inside me snaps.

Fuck, I'm sick of this. I'm sick of having to say goodbye. I'm sick of having to leave her.

I can see Gregor through the bakery window, working across the street in the garage. I know I should be strong. I should stand my ground and treat Emily like who she really is: my best friend's daughter. But after that asshole Mike came in here and treated her like shit, I'm reluctant to go. If I don't make Emily mine, some other guy will. Maybe he'll be a decent guy, or maybe he'll be an asshole like Mike. Either way, she'll be taken from me. I'll never get another chance with her again, and I'll have to spend the rest of my life watching her with somebody else. She could get married. Take his last name. Have his fucking babies. I'll still have my friendship with Gregor, but I won't have her. I won't have Emily.

How could I ever fucking bear that?

With one last look toward Gregor and the garage, I turn away from the door and walk back toward the counter.

“Did you want something else?” Emily asks hopefully.

I nod. My eyes linger on her pretty brown eyes, sparkling with light. She's like sunshine, and I want to bask in her rays for as long as I can. My friendship with Gregor means the world to me, but there's one thing that matters more.

“Do you want to come over for dinner tomorrow?”

Emily's eyes widen. “Dinner?”

“Yes...to clear the air after the accident.” The lie comes before I can stop it. Even now, I can't help but make excuses, acting like I came here for a bagel, or that I'm inviting her

over to clear the air...it's all bullshit, yet somehow being honest about how badly I want her still feels so wrong. Like I'm corrupting something pure and innocent.

"I'm the one who rear-ended you," Emily says, raising an eyebrow. "It's me who should be inviting you to dinner."

I wave her off. "It doesn't matter who rear-ended who. I want you to come to dinner."

She looks like she's holding back a grin and it makes me want to kiss her again more than anything, but I restrain myself.

"My dad is heading out of town tomorrow, just for the weekend," she says tentatively. "Something to do with sourcing new car parts. So, he won't be able to come."

I cock my head, raising an eyebrow. "The invitation is for you, Emily. Not your dad."

She presses her lips together, still fighting her smile as she says, "Okay. Then yes. I'd like that."

* * *

I head back to the garage soon after asking Emily to dinner. I've been away too long already, and I don't want Gregor to get suspicious.

"Pretty long lunch," Gregor says, not looking up from his work as I stride back into the garage.

"I was hungry. Went to the diner to eat."

This time he looks up. "Bullshit. I saw you go into the bakery and I saw you leave again just now." I feel my pulse quicken and I scrutinize Gregor's face for signs of suspicion, but there are none. Only confusion. "What are you hiding?"

I sigh. "Emily had some trouble with a customer."

It's not a lie. He doesn't need to know that I asked his daughter out to dinner tomorrow night while I was in there.

"What kind of trouble?" Gregor asks, scowling. I have his full attention now.

“Do you know Mike Payne?”

Gregor’s frown deepens. “Sure, I know him. He went to school with Emily. Came in to get his car fixed a few months back. Turns out he’s a little shit stain. I heard he got barred from the diner *and* the bar last month for making women uncomfortable. Apparently, he’s got a record for harassment, stalking, you name it. The guy’s a fucking waste of space. If I’d known all that when he showed up here, I’d have told him to shove his broken taillights up his ass.”

His words make my whole body tense up. I’ve seen for myself what a loser Mike is, but I had no idea it went so far. Knowing the truth only makes me feel more protective of Emily. I regret not kicking his ass when I had the chance.

“He was sniffing around the bakery, making comments to Emily. She told him to cut it out and he was disrespectful. Called her names.” Gregor drops his tools and straightens up, making for the bakery, but I put a hand out to stop him. “He’s gone now. I got rid of him, and Emily banned him from the bakery.”

Gregor lets out an angry exhale and shakes my hand off him. “I’m going to see her. Check she’s okay.” He looks at me, straight in the eye, and says, “If that son of a bitch does anything to hurt my kid, I’ll fucking kill him.”

He turns away and I watch as he crosses the street, storming over to the bakery. Sometimes I forget that I’m not the only one who feels protective of Emily, and the realization makes guilt rise in my throat, thick and heavy. If Gregor knew that Emily was coming over to my cabin tomorrow for dinner, alone, would he look at me that way? With that much hatred and rage?

Of course he would.

Gregor has always been a protective father, especially since Emily’s mom left them all those years ago. I know I’m walking on thin ice.

But Emily’s worth it. She makes it all worth it.

Emily

The rest of the day passes by painfully slowly. I get a few customers, including an angry visit from my dad who wants to hear all about what happened with Mike, but mostly I spend my day staring at the clock, counting down the hours until Saturday. The thought of having dinner with Axel at his cabin fills me with butterflies, and I can barely sit still as the day crawls by.

Damn, why does time have to pass so slowly when you're excited about something?

I've been replaying Axel's invitation in my mind all afternoon, trying to figure out if I'm reading too much into it. He said it was just to clear the air after the accident...but if that's true, why doesn't he want my dad to come? Is he worried my dad will find out somehow about what happened after the accident? The kiss.

With a sigh, I shake off the thoughts of my dad, trying to ignore the guilt creeping up my skin. This might be my only chance with Axel. I don't want to spend the whole time feeling guilty, like I'm betraying my dad. I know he wouldn't be happy about my feelings for his best friend, and he'd be damn furious if he knew I was heading to Axel's house for dinner all alone after we kissed last week. But I have to follow my heart. And if that means going behind my dad's back, then so be it.

When the afternoon finally begins to draw to a close, I clean up the bakery and head outside, automatically looking across at the garage to try and get a final glimpse of Axel. With a start, I realize he's looking right at me, watching me head for my car. He reminds me of a guard dog as he stands there, and I'm silently grateful. He said he'd keep me safe after my confrontation with Mike, and knowing that he's keeping a

close eye on me makes me feel much better about the whole thing.

I wave at him, and he raises his hand. I watch him in my rear-view mirror as I drive away until he's out of sight.

* * *

My dad leaves on Saturday morning, and I spend the rest of the day getting ready for dinner with Axel. After fussing over my hair and makeup and changing outfits a hundred times, I finally leave the house at 6 p.m., driving up the winding mountain path until I reach his cabin.

It's wilder than the cabin I share with my dad, more remote and higher up the mountain, surrounded by snow-covered fir trees. It looks like a beautiful winter postcard, and the orange glow from the windows makes it look even more inviting. I haven't been to Axel's cabin for years. When I was younger, it was always Axel who came to our cabin for dinner, never the other way around. I can't wait to see where he lives again, but now that I'm here, I also feel nerves start to tingle in my chest.

I get out of the car and instantly freeze. I can feel eyes on the back of my neck. It's the same sensation I had outside the bakery.

CRACK.

A twig snaps from somewhere in the trees behind me, and I whip around, but there's nobody there. Everything is still and quiet. I frown at my own paranoia. I'm halfway up Frozen Peak—surely nobody would follow me all the way up here. My confrontation with Mike has made me jumpy.

Shaking my fear away, I walk to the cabin door, butterflies still fluttering inside my stomach at the thought of seeing Axel. I take deep breaths and trying to stay calm as I knock.

Axel opens the door almost immediately. He looks gorgeous in his simple white shirt: it stretches across his broad chest, his thick biceps on full display. He takes up the whole doorway, his handsome face illuminated by the cozy glow of the cabin. Suddenly, all I want to do is kiss him. I want my lips on his, his rough beard against my face...I want to drown in his sexy

masculine scent and feel his tongue sliding between my lips just like before. Just thinking about it is making me light-headed and giddy.

“Glad you made it,” Axel says. I notice his eyes lingering on my body, reverently looking at my curves in the black dress I’m wearing. “You look amazing.”

I take a deep breath and smile. “You look amazing too. Especially for a grump.”

He smirks and ushers me inside, closing the door behind us. “You just got here and you’re already running that mouth.”

“I’m just keeping you on your toes,” I protest, fighting back my smile.

“Well, that much is true.”

He takes my coat for me and I take the opportunity to look around the cabin, savoring the warmth after having been outside in the frigid air. It’s just like I remember it: simple and cozy, with a roaring fireplace, rustic wooden furniture, and a comfy-looking couch.

“I nearly forgot how nice your cabin is,” I tell him, inspecting the polished wooden dining table. “Your furniture is beautiful.”

“Thanks. I can’t take the credit, though. I got it all from my buddy, Hunter. He makes it himself.”

I nod and settle down on the couch in front of the fire, the quiet crackling sounds soothing my nerves.

“I hope you’re hungry,” Axel calls as he heads into the kitchen. “We’ve got a lot of food coming up.”

“Sounds good. I’m always hungry.”

I get up from the couch and peek inside the kitchen where Axel is juggling several pots and pans on the stove at once, making it look easy. The smell of homemade food fills the kitchen, and right on cue, my stomach gargles.

“Can I help with anything?” I ask.

“No. All you need is an appetite. Go sit at the table; it’s almost ready.”

I do as he says. In no time, he’s bringing out dish after dish and laying them on the table. There’s roast chicken, cheesy potatoes, roasted vegetables, grilled corn, and cheese-stuffed peppers. It all looks delicious, and I tuck in gratefully.

“This is amazing,” I say between bites of chicken. “Damn, you can cook for me anytime.”

“Sounds good to me.” Axel is watching me over his plate, but I avoid his gaze. The atmosphere between us is a little unsure. I still haven’t figured out if he asked me here tonight to clear the air after our kiss so we could move on and forget about it...or if he asked me here to continue what we started in the car last week. Part of me wants to just come right out and ask him, but I don’t want to make things awkward between us.

But God, I hope he wants another kiss. I’d give anything...

“So,” Axel says, his eyes still on me. “We never really talked about your time at college.”

I shrug. “There’s not much to tell. I majored in business, but I have no idea what I want to do with it yet.”

“What about friends?” Axel asks. “Boyfriends?”

I meet his gaze when he asks about boyfriends. He looks jealous, and it sparks something hopeful in my belly.

“I made friends, yeah. But only college friends, you know? Nothing life-long. As for boyfriends,” I shake my head, “there was nothing like that. My friends all thought I was a prude, but I just wasn’t interested in college guys.”

Axel nods. He looks relieved, and I can barely hold back a grin. “What about you? What did you get up to while I was at college?”

“Same old. Fixed up cars. Worked on the cabin.”

“Any girlfriends during that time?” I ask, trying to keep my voice neutral. I never saw Axel with a woman when I was a kid, but who knows what happened in the four years I was

away for college. I never found a way to ask him before, even if I've always wondered.

Axel shakes his head. "No. Nobody. You know me. Always been a lone wolf."

It's the answer I'm expecting, but it still fills me with warm and heady relief.

When we've finally finished our meal, Axel gets up to clear our plates and bring out the dessert. It gives me a moment to work up the courage to ask my next question as he carries in a huge chocolate fudge cake with scoops of vanilla ice cream on the side.

"Did you miss me?" I ask lightly as Axel cuts me a generous slice of cake. "While I was at college?" I try to make it sound like I'm teasing, but I can hear the note of longing in my voice and I'm sure he can too.

"Sure, I did." He smiles at me. "Things were way too quiet without that smart mouth of yours around."

"I missed you too."

My words hang between us and I swallow nervously, busying myself with my cake. Axel is watching me, and the heat of his gaze is making me blush.

"Look at me."

It's not a question. It's a command. I do as he says, putting down my fork and looking straight at him.

"Do you know why I asked you here tonight?" he continues, his voice serious.

I shake my head. "I mean, you said it was to clear the air after the accident, but I figured you meant you wanted to clear the after...you know..."

"After our kiss," he finishes. There's a glimmer of something in his eyes at the mention of it, and it makes my breath catch.

"Yes." I sigh, nervously fiddling with my hair. "I figured you might want to forget it. I mean, you haven't mentioned it

since it happened.”

Axel leans across the table and grabs my hands, engulfing my palms in his much bigger ones. “I could never forget that kiss, Emily. Not even if I wanted to.”

My breath is coming out raggedly as his eyes burn into mine. I can hardly speak, but I manage to stammer, “Me neither.”

“I didn’t mention the kiss because I felt guilty,” Axel says, his hand rising up away from mine to stroke my cheek. “You’re so much younger than me. And your dad, well...”

“I know,” I say, cutting him off. I don’t want to talk about my dad. Not while I’m melting beneath Axel’s gaze.

He sighs deeply, looking at me with so much longing that my heart starts to pound. “I know I shouldn’t want you, Emily. But you’ve been driving me fucking crazy since the day you came back from college.”

My skin starts to thrum with electricity at his words. It gives me the courage to be honest with him. “You’ve been driving me crazy since before college,” I tell him. “I’ve had a crush on you for as long as I can remember.”

He raises his eyebrows, holding back a smile. “Seriously?”

Reluctantly, I nod. “Yes. Since I was a kid. That’s top-secret information, so don’t you dare make fun of me for it.”

He chuckles. “Honey, I wouldn’t dream of it.”

I warm when he calls me honey. It should feel wrong...he’s twenty years older than me. I know I should only think of him as a father figure. But I can’t help how I feel. I want him so badly that it almost physically hurts, and being so close to him, having him stare at me like a hungry man stumbling upon a banquet, well it sure isn’t helping matters. My panties are soaked through, and I squirm in my seat, shuddering with want. I wish I could tell him how badly I need him. How desperate my body is for him. But I can’t bring myself to say the words.

“When do you need to be home?” Axel asks, his eyes darkening as he watches me.

“My dad gets back on Monday morning.”

He nods mutely and stands up from the table, holding out a hand to me. I take it and let him guide me toward the couch where he sits down so close to me that our sides press together. The firelight illuminates his face, making him look even more gorgeous.

“I need you to listen to me carefully, Emily,” Axel mutters, his voice low. “I need to know that this is what you want. You and me.” My eyes widen, but he continues before I can speak. “I want you more than you could ever know, and if we start then I’m not going to be able to stop myself. I need you to be sure.”

His eyes burn into mine, and for a moment, I let my head swirl with thoughts. My dad. Angry. Betrayed. Upset. It’s a painful thought. But no matter how much I love my dad, I know I can’t resist Axel. My body has been crying out for him for so long, and now that I finally have a chance with him, I have to take it. I need this. I need him.

Decisively, I nod my head. “I’m sure.”

Axel makes a low, growly sound somewhere deep in his throat, and before I can so much as breathe, he pounces. His mouth crashes against mine, warm and hard, and immediately he parts my lips with his tongue, his beard rough against my face. I kiss him back, melting into him, our hands pulling, grasping desperately at each other. My whole body is on fire as his hands slide beneath my dress, his calloused skin firm against my hips. With a groan, he pulls me on top of him so I’m straddling him on the couch, and the contact makes me wetter than ever.

More. I need more.

With a rush of courage, I start to grind myself against Axel’s lap, moaning at the friction between us.

“Holy fuck. You naughty girl,” he groans between kisses, grabbing my ass and helping me move back and forth against

him.

“Only for you.” Grinding on him is making me more confident, and I relish talking to him as I move faster.

“Damn right it’s only for me,” he growls.

He seems overcome with some wild, animal need, and he tugs my dress off me urgently, throwing it aside until I’m in nothing but my bra and panties. His hands reach around my back to unclasp my bra, tossing it toward my discarded dress until I’m topless, still straddling him, my ample chest level with his face.

“Fuck,” he mutters, eyeing my breasts hungrily before he reaches out to grope them with his hands, his fingers teasing my nipples, sending shocks of pleasure through me. “You’re so damn gorgeous, Emily. You have no idea how crazy you make me.”

I grin at him, tossing my hair behind my shoulders, excitement and raw energy pumping through my veins as I say, “Then show me.”

Axel

I'm fucking speechless as I stare at Emily, taking her soft breasts in my hands. They're full and rounded, her sweet pink nipples hard as pebbles as I tease them between my fingers. When she tells me to "show her" how much I want her, I lunge forward and take one of her nipples in my mouth, sucking hard as she squirms on top of me, moaning those sweet little moans of hers. It's not enough. I want her screaming for me. I want her begging for more. Now that she's on top of me, her sexy curves pressed against my body, all my doubts and worries have vanished. They've been replaced by pure longing, wild and instinctual, and my cock is straining for release in my boxers, pressing hard against Emily's open legs which are wrapped tight around me.

I pull away from her nipple with a soft popping sound and reluctantly pull her up off my lap, giving me access to her panties. She stands in front of the fire, and I can't keep my eyes off her perfect tits as I yank at her panties. They're soaking wet against my hands as I pull them down, and Emily kicks them off, her eyes full of anticipation. The desire to taste her pussy overwhelms me, but first, I let my eyes roam over her naked body. She's even more perfect than I imagined. I stare at her rounded hips, down past the softness of her belly until I'm looking at her pussy.

"Jesus, Emily."

She's pressing her lips together shyly, standing exposed like a raw nerve in front of me. "Nobody's ever seen me naked before," she says. I can see her hands itching to hide her breasts from view, but she keeps them at her sides.

"I'm the only man who ever gets to see you naked," I tell her firmly. "Do you understand me?"

“Yes.” She smiles teasingly. “You’re always so damn bossy.”

“I’m serious, Emily.” I step toward her and pull her against me, my eyes fixed on hers. She looks so innocent, her eyes wide and doe-like as I say, “You’re mine. Your body is for my eyes only. That’s the way it’s going to be.”

She nods silently, her smile gone, replaced by pure desire. “Yes. I promise.”

Once I have her word, I don’t waste a second. I push her onto the couch so that she’s on her back, and she gasps in surprise as I kneel down and part her thighs, exposing her slick pink folds. She’s soaking wet. Her desire is glistening on her thighs, and I can’t bear to wait another second. I need to taste her sweet pussy.

I sink my head between her open legs, latching my mouth onto her clit. It takes her by surprise. She shrieks, her whole body bucking forward, but I hold her down. I want her to take it. She’s my girl now, and she’s going to take every torturously pleasurable sensation that I give her. She has no damn choice.

“Oh, fuck! Oh my God!” she screams, her whole body squirming as I suck harder, pressing two fingers against her soaking-wet entrance. I thrust them inside her, smiling against her clit at the sound of her cries. I want to give her so much pleasure that she can’t take it anymore. I want her to forget her own name. I lap up her sugary sweet juices, groaning at the taste of her on my tongue. Her wetness is soaking my beard, and I can smell the heady scent of her arousal, making me groan with want. I’m desperate to be inside her. But I want her to come first. I want to hear her moans when she orgasms. I pump my fingers in and out, sucking harder on her clit until her screams reach a fever pitch.

“Oh, I’m going to—oh, God, Axel I’m going to come—oh YES!”

I feel her body tense and release like a coiled spring snapping. She screams as her body trembles with her release, and I feel a warm rush of liquid against my beard. When her shaking has subsided, I pull away from her clit and look down

at her. Her eyes are glazed and she's totally breathless, looking at me like I'm some kind of God. It makes my heart beat faster. I want her to look at me like this all the time. Like I'm her whole damn world.

"You're so fucking sexy when you come, Emily," I say, grabbing at my shirt and pants until I'm wearing nothing but my boxers. "Now, I'm going to make you come again."

Emily's face lights up with a sly grin. "Is that a promise?"

"You bet it is, baby."

I pull down my boxers, letting my cock spring free, enjoying Emily's gasp as she stares at it.

"Holy crap," she breathes, wide-eyed. "I figured you'd be big, but I never thought you'd be *that* big."

My lips tug into a smirk, and she yelps with surprise as I reach down to scoop her up from the couch, carrying her bridal style into my bedroom and laying her out on the bed.

"Did you just manhandle me?" she asks, that sweet impish grin on her face. Even when I'm about to fuck her senseless, she still won't let that smart mouth quit.

"Yep. And now, I'm going to do much worse than manhandle you."

That wipes the smile off her face. She gulps, staring at me nervously. I probably look pretty intimidating to be taking her virginity. I'm a big guy all over, and honestly, maybe she's right to be nervous. I don't know how I'll be able to hold myself back once I'm inside that sweet pussy. Emily brings out something wild in me, something I've never felt before. Something animal.

"Is it going to hurt?" she asks as I get on the bed with her, taking another moment to gaze at her stunning curves, appreciating every inch of her. Her question makes me pause. I don't want to hurt Emily—not ever. I only want to make her feel good.

"Honestly, I don't know," I tell her. "I've never done this before."

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Never? Not once.”

I shake my head. “I’ve never felt this kind of desire before, Emily. There’s never been anybody else.”

It’s the truth. While living on a mountain has never given me many dating opportunities, I’ve also just never felt the urge before. I figured long ago that that’s just who I am: a lone wolf in every sense of the word, with no need for a woman in my life. No need for love. No need for sex. And then Emily came back from college and turned the whole world upside down. Now my need is washing over me like a tidal wave, as if a lifetime of sexual desire is hitting me all at once. And it’s all because of her.

Emily smiles at my confession. “It’s the same for me. You know, I’ve never even had a real kiss with a guy before. Not until our kiss in the car.”

I grin at her words. I don’t know how this gorgeous girl hasn’t been kissed before me, but I’m fucking relieved to hear it. I want her mouth, her body, every single part of her to be mine. Only mine.

“I’m your first and your last, baby,” I murmur, planting a kiss on her soft lips. “We’ll figure it all out together, okay? I won’t let myself hurt you. I promise.”

She nods. “I know. I trust you, Axel.”

With a final kiss, I position myself on top of her, easing between her open legs until my cock presses against her tight entrance.

“How the hell is it going to fit?” I hear her mutter under her breath, bending her head to look at the place where our bodies meet.

“It’ll fit, baby. Don’t worry.”

To prove my point, I start to push inside her, inching my cock into her tight, wet heat. It’s unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. I feel like her pussy is sucking at my cock, trying to milk me dry, and it takes every ounce of self-control not to come there and then.

“Holy fuck,” I say, letting out a hiss of breath as I bottom out deep inside her. “Are you okay, Emily?”

Her face is screwed up like she’s in pain, but she nods at me. “I’m okay. It’s uncomfortable, though.”

“I’ll go slow to start off. Your body will adjust.”

“I hope so,” she groans, squirming around, trying to get comfortable. “It feels like you’ve put something way too big inside something way too small.”

“I promise it will be okay.” I stroke her face, my thumb brushing against her plump lips. Fuck, she’s beautiful. How did I ever get this lucky?

Emily nods, and I start to move. Slowly at first, gently pushing in and out, letting her adjust to my size until the discomfort on her face starts to ease. The slow pace is torture, and just as I think my control is about to snap, Emily lets out a moan of pleasure, opening up her legs wider.

“It feels better now,” she says, her cheeks flushed with pleasure. “It feels good.”

With a groan of relief, I finally pick up the pace, grabbing Emily’s hands in mine as I start to fuck her faster. She gasps as I pound her pussy, her head thrown back as she starts to moan for more.

“Oh, yes! Oh, don’t stop Axel, that feels so good!” Her words cut off with a cry as I push deeper, savoring the wet, slapping sounds of skin on skin as I fuck her harder.

“Don’t worry, baby,” I say, my breathing ragged as I move faster. “I’m not stopping until you come on my cock.”

She moans her approval, and I reach down between us to play with her clit, still fucking her in a punishing rhythm. Her back arches and her eyes squeeze shut as she cries out with pleasure.

“Look at me,” I growl.

She does as she’s told, opening her eyes wide, keeping her gaze locked on mine as I claim her body.

“Always—so damn—bossy,” she gasps between moans, and I give her a sly smile.

“Don’t test me, princess.”

She doesn’t push her luck. Instead, she reaches up to grab my shoulders, sobbing as I pound her harder.

“It—feels so good—holy—oh God, don’t stop.” I love the way she pants out her pleading words between thrusts. I want to hear her beg for the sweet release that only I can give her.

“If you want to come, you better ask for it,” I tell her.

Obstinately, she presses her lips together. “You c-can’t—tell...oh fuck!...can’t tell me—what—to do Axel Dean.”

That sassy smart mouth only makes me more desperate. I reach up to tease her nipples, one hand still rubbing her clit. I angle my cock so it hits a spot that makes her scream and tense, and I watch as her eyes roll back, her whole body starting to tremble around me.

“Beg for it,” I command. “Beg for me.”

“Oh—oh, God, please! Please, Axel, please!”

“That’s my girl,” I groan. “Now you’re going to come for me. I won’t stop fucking you until you do...I’ll fuck you all damn night if I have to. There’s no escaping me, Emily. Now come.”

For once, Emily does as she’s told. She goes off like a firecracker, screaming, grabbing wildly at my back, her nails digging into my skin. I feel her pussy clenching tight around me, and I grit my teeth at the sensation, finally giving way to my own orgasm. With a shuddering groan, I fill her with my come, making her mine once and for all.

My Emily.

I collapse onto the bed next to her, and we lay there for a while, catching our breath and coming back to ourselves. I turn to look at her, watching as she takes deep breaths, her eyes still glazed from her orgasm. Her hair is a mess and her lips are swollen, her whole body slack and still shaking slightly. She looks like she’s been fucked senseless. It suits

her, and I'm the only man who will ever get to see her like this. I'll make damn sure of that.

"I..." Emily says from beside me, her voice slightly hoarse. "I never imagined sex would be that good."

I smile at her, leaning over to plant a kiss on her lips. "Neither did I. You better get used to it."

She grins lazily at me, that familiar teasing glint in her eyes. "Who says it's going to happen again?"

"I do."

"Oh, well if King Axel says so..."

I quickly reach down to stroke her clit. It's still over-sensitive from her orgasm, and she yelps in surprise.

"What were you saying?" I ask her, keeping my face deadly serious.

She swipes at me playfully, and with a chuckle, I pull her into my arms, asking, "Has anybody ever told you that you're a damn brat."

"Only you," she murmurs, snuggling against me. "Maybe if you keep giving me orgasms like that, I'll change my ways."

"I doubt it. I don't think that smart mouth's going anywhere."

She makes a sleepy noise of agreement, and I feel her body relaxing against mine. It's dark out, and I think it must be getting late. Not to mention all the physical activity we've been enjoying...

"Don't fall asleep just yet, honey," I murmur. "I need to get you cleaned up."

I get out of bed and head into the en suite, grabbing a cloth and wetting it with warm water. I head back toward Emily and wipe the cloth between her legs. She watches me with tired eyes, smiling slightly at the gesture.

"You know," she says, "under that grumpy exterior, you're actually pretty thoughtful."

“Don’t sound so surprised.”

Once I’ve cleaned her up, I get back in bed and pull her close to me, drifting off in a hazy post-sex stupor. I’m just awake enough to hear Emily say, “I’m not surprised. Not at all” before I finally fall into a deep sleep.

Emily

When I wake up the next morning, it takes me a minute to remember where I am. I look around at the wood-paneled walls and the unfamiliar view of fir trees outside the window, noticing the strange feeling of something warm and heavy in bed next to me. I turn to face the thing beside me and almost jump with surprise when I see Axel sitting up in bed, his eyes fixed on me. My eyes drop to his bare chest, lingering on the slope of his broad shoulders just visible above the blankets, and suddenly, last night comes rushing back to me.

Axel and I. Dinner. Kissing. Making love.

“Good morning,” he says, watching me.

“Good morning.” My voice sounds strained and my throat is a little sore. I suddenly remember all the wild noises I was making last night. It’s amazing that the cabin is still standing: after all the screaming I was doing, I thought the roof might have caved in.

“I’ve been waiting for you to wake up,” Axel says.

“I can see that. How long have you been staring at me?”

He shrugs. “You look beautiful when you sleep.”

I smile at his compliment, even though it’s a damn lie. I’m a hideous sleeper: open mouth, limbs flung out all over the place, face squashed against the pillow. Suddenly I really wish I’d woken up before him.

“Want some breakfast?”

I nod, suddenly feeling ravenous. “Yes, please.”

Axel gets out of bed, and I ogle his thick chest and bulging biceps as he grabs a pair of boxers. I see a quick flash of his cock, long and thick, and I have to stop my mouth from

watering as he pulls up his shorts. The bulge is still hugely visible, and I can't keep my eyes off it. Axel notices.

"What are you staring at?" He's smiling at me slyly, knowing damn well what I'm staring at.

"Your boxers have a hole in them." I cross my arms. "That's what I was staring at."

He strides toward the bed and before I have time to say another word, he's on top of me, pinning me down.

"You're a bad liar, Emily," he mutters. "You were staring at my cock."

"Prove it."

I gasp as he presses his bulge in between my legs, the thin fabric of his boxers the only material separating us.

"You're lucky that you're hungry." His mouth is beside my ear, his voice low and gravelly as he grinds his cock against my sensitive clit. "It means you get to have some breakfast before I fuck you again."

I'm speechless as he gets off me, wetness pooling between my thighs as he beckons me into the kitchen. I can't even think of one of my usual teasing retorts, and Axel's lips tug into a barely-there smirk as I get out of bed. He knows he's won.

How the hell could any woman resist this man?

I grab a t-shirt from the closet and put it on. Even with my thick, curvy figure, the material drowns me as if I'm wearing a dress, and I pad into the kitchen with the fabric hanging off me.

Axel watches me as I sit at the table, his eyes darkening with something raw as he says, "You look sexy in my clothes."

It looks like he's about to grab me and take me back to his bedroom, so I wave my finger at him. "You promised me some breakfast first."

Reluctantly, Axel turns away from me, starting to whip together a pancake mixture. I watch him as he works, my mind full of our perfect night together. Now we have a whole

glorious Sunday stretching before us, and my body is buzzing with excitement at the thought of all the things we can do together in that time. But another part of me feels sad. After all, today is all it can be. How can I keep this going with Axel when my dad's back? Axel and I are the two people he knows best in the world: he'd figure out something was up sooner or later, especially if I kept making late-night trips to Axel's cabin.

Thinking about my dad dampens the fiery joy I've been feeling since last night. I've loved every second of my time with Axel, but I've also betrayed my dad. I know he would never forgive Axel if he found out, and the thought of ruining my dad's friendship with his best friend fills me with guilt and misery. I know I'm being selfish. But I can't help it. I've never wanted any man other than Axel Dean. Part of me wishes things were different...there are billions of guys on this planet, so why the heck did I have to fall for my dad's best friend of all people? It doesn't make any sense, and yet I know deep down that my feelings for Axel are completely out of my control. The way I feel about him isn't my choice to make. He's all I want, and now, thinking about my dad's reaction if he ever finds out about us, I can't help but hate myself for that.

"Everything okay?" Axel asks as he sets a plate of stacked pancakes down in front of me. I didn't even realize he'd finished making them. They look delicious, thick and fluffy and dripping with syrup. But after thinking about my dad, my appetite has turned to ash on my tongue.

"I'm fine!" I say brightly, forcing myself to cut into the pancakes and take a big bite. They're absolutely delicious, but I'm still struggling to enjoy eating them. "Thanks for the pancakes. They're awesome."

Axel watches me with narrowed eyes, and I know he sees right through my charade. He's always been able to see the real me.

"Emily, tell me what's wrong."

It's not a question. It's a demand. He's been making a lot of those lately, though secretly, I love his bossiness, even if I

pretend I don't. He looks at me expectantly, and part of me doesn't want to tell him what's bothering me. The last thing I want to do is ruin our time together. Heck, maybe if I remind him of my dad, Axel will suddenly come to his senses and tell me he never wants to do this again. Maybe he'll ask me to go and never come back.

"Emily, stop overthinking whatever it is you're thinking about and just tell me."

Damn. Why does he have to be so good at reading me?

"I was just..." I begin, stirring my fork around my plate, "well, I was just thinking about my dad."

Axel sighs quietly, looking away from me, and immediately my heart starts pounding nervously.

Will he want me to go?

"Emily," he says after a while. "I get it. Of course I do. Last night was the best night of my life, but it doesn't stop me from feeling guilty. You're so young, and you're Gregor's daughter, and it's all so fucking complicated. I know that." He grabs my hands across the table and looks me in the eyes. "But it doesn't make any difference. I still want you. I shouldn't, but I do, more than anything. After last night, I could never stop myself from being with you Emily. Not even if I wanted to."

His words make my heart flutter with relief, and I lean across the table to kiss him, smiling at the familiar tickle of his beard on my chin.

"It was the best night of my life too, you know. I loved every second."

Axel grins at me, a proper grin, which is about as rare flying pigs where he's concerned, but it lights up his whole face and fills me with warmth. I wish I could drop the subject and just bask in this perfect happiness, but there's still one question eating away at me.

"What about when my dad comes back, though?" I ask tentatively. "He'll find out. I'm sure he will."

“Then he’ll just have to get used to it,” Axel says. “He’s my best buddy, and I love him like a brother, but I’m not scared of him. I won’t let him keep me from you. Even if he finds out and never wants to see me again, I’ll still put you first Emily.”

I offer him a weak smile, but his words pull at the fear in my belly. Ruining my dad’s friendship...making him miserable...heck, I wonder if he’d cut me off if he found out? I know my dad loves me, and he’s always done everything he can to bring me happiness, but maybe this betrayal would be too much for him to bear. Maybe he’d never want to see me again. I have to swallow down tears at the thought, and I feel Axel’s rough palm close over mine.

“Hey, listen,” he says. “Let’s not talk about it. I promise we’ll figure it all out when he gets back tomorrow. For now, though, let’s try and have a great day together. Just you and me.”

I take a deep breath and nod, mentally pulling myself together. “You’re right. I don’t want to waste our Sunday together worrying over it. We’ll talk about it when he’s back. Until then, I just want us to be together.”

Axel nods and offers me a reassuring smile. “We’ll find a way through this. I promise. Gregor’s a good man. I think maybe, with time, he’ll understand.”

Axel

I put on a smile, but I know deep down that there's no way in hell Gregor will understand what's happening between me and Emily. He'll hate me forever. I'm sure of it. But Emily doesn't need to worry about that. Even if I have to lose my best friend, my girl is worth the sacrifice. There's nothing in the world more important to me than my friendship with Gregor, except his perfect daughter. She has to come first. But while I know that I will always choose Emily, I'm not so sure that Emily will choose me. After all, Gregor is her dad. He's the only parent she's had since her mom abandoned them both and started a new family all those years ago. As much as I want her, and as much as I wish she could be mine forever, I have a feeling that Emily will put her dad first. She's a good daughter, and I can see the way her guilt is eating her up, even if she's trying to put on a brave face. If her dad makes her choose between us, I have a feeling she'll choose him, and as much as it pains me to think about it, I can't blame her for that. All I can do is make the most of the time I have with her. And even if she decides we can't be together, I'll never let her go. I'll keep watching her every damn day, keeping her safe. Protected. Loved. Even if it's only from a distance. The thought breaks my fucking heart, but I have to hold it together in front of her. If today is all we get, then I want to make the most of every second.

“Thank you for the pancakes,” Emily says, pulling me from my thoughts. Her plate is clean. “They were awesome. I never knew you were such a good cook.”

“I'm not bad.”

She smiles at me, and though I can still see the worry in her eyes, I know she's determined to make the most of things, just like me. I'm going to do my damn best to make this the best

day she's ever had. I want to make her smile...and come. A lot.

"Have you ever made red velvet cake?" she asks.

"Can't say that I have. I've tried yours though, at the bakery. It's the best red velvet cake I've ever had."

She grins. "Thank you. Now, let me teach you how to make it! I hope you have red food coloring and plenty of cake flour. We're going to need it."

* * *

"Hey!" Emily snaps, whacking my hand away from the delicious-looking red sponge. "Hands off. It has to cool first. Then we can frost it."

She's got flour in her hair, and she's smiling proudly at the two red cakes just waiting to be sandwiched together. The whole kitchen smells sweet and cakey. It reminds me of the bakery.

"Damn," I say, pulling my hand away. "And you say I'm the bossy one."

Emily rolls her eyes. "Okay, so maybe we're both a little bossy. But you're definitely bossier than me!"

"Is that so?"

She nods decisively. "For sure. There's no contest. Plus, you're grumpier than me too."

My lips tug slightly upward at that. "That part's probably true. But you're brattier than me."

Emily starts assembling the ingredients for the frosting, but even though she's not looking at me, she's smiling.

"I live to annoy you," she says.

"Brat."

"Grump."

She turns on the food mixer, beating all the frosting ingredients together, deliberately drowning out my response with the whirring sound. She's sexy as hell when she bakes:

totally confident and sure of herself, knowing exactly what she's doing. I'm hungry for more than just red velvet cake as I stare at her curves, my t-shirt the only thing covering her. My cock is stirring as I watch her, straining against my boxers.

"How much longer until the cakes are completely cooled?" I ask.

"Only a little while to go." She puts down the finished frosting and washes her hands.

"A little while is all I need."

She looks up at me, leaning against the counter. "All you need for what?"

"To make you come."

I see her eyes flash with something naughty as I hoist her up so that she's sitting on the counter.

"And yes," I mutter as I rip my shirt off her, "before you ask, I *am* manhandling you. And there's nothing you can do about it."

She moans with anticipation at my words, opening her legs so that her pussy is on display, just as wet and enticing as it was last night.

"I like when you manhandle me," she says slyly, reaching up to tease her own nipples. There's still a little timidity in her eyes, but I can also see how much she wants this. My sweet, insatiable girl. I watch her for a moment as she pinches at the pink buds until I can't take it any longer. My cock is aching to be inside her, but first I want to taste her cream again.

"I'm going to do more than manhandle you, Emily," I tell her as I start to lower my face toward her folds. "I'm going to make you scream. I'm going to fuck that sweet little pussy, and I'm not going to stop until you come. Understand?"

I don't give her a chance to answer. Instead, I sink my head between her legs and start to feast.

Emily

My whole body spasms with pleasure as Axel's mouth finds my clit. I watch him suck on it greedily, his beard pressing into my wetness, his eyes closed as he laps up my juices with a groan. The sight makes me light-headed, and I grip hard onto the edge of the counter, unable to take the pleasure. It feels too good, too sensitive...torturous. I feel his thick fingers pressing at my entrance, sliding inside me, filling me up. It makes me ache for his cock.

"P-please," I moan, trembling. "No m-more teasing, Axel, pl-please fuck me."

He pulls away from my clit and looks at me, his eyes dark with lust.

"Ask me again."

His fingers are still inside me, and he starts thrusting them in and out, hitting a delicious spot deep inside me that makes me shudder.

"Oh, you're insufferable!" I cry, gasping. "You heard me the first time."

His fingers start to move faster, and my breath catches in my throat. "Yeah, I heard you," he murmurs. "And I want to hear you say it again."

The feeling of his fingers pushing inside of me is making it hard for me to speak. "I—I said...I said please fuck me, Axel. Please."

He slides his fingers out of me and pulls me down off the counter. He turns me away from him and bends me over so that I'm leaning forward over the countertop, my breasts pressing down against the smooth surface.

"You asked for it, princess," he breathes into my ear.

I look back over my shoulder and watch as Axel positions himself at my entrance, sliding into me from behind in one amazing thrust that makes me cry out. I love being full of his cock. I love the way he stretches me open, pressing against my walls, setting my whole body alight with pleasure.

“Oh!” I shriek as he starts to move. This time, he doesn’t start slow. He’s fucking me like an animal, slamming into me so fast that I can barely catch my breath between thrusts. It feels so wild...so naughty...and so fucking good. He grips my hips, holding me still as he drives his cock inside me, his balls slapping against my clit with every thrust until I’m seeing stars.

“Do you like when I fuck you from behind, princess?” His voice is next to my ear. “Do you like when I fill your pussy?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!”

“Not such a smart mouth now, are you?” he growls.

I’m too far gone to argue. I just nod my head blindly, desperate for more. “Please don’t stop.”

“You should know how this works by now, baby. I won’t stop until you come.”

I feel his body pressing down on me from behind, his front against my back. His arms encircle me, groping at my breasts, pinching my sensitive nipples between his fingers. The different sensations of pleasure are too much for me. I can feel my orgasm building, pulling in the base of my stomach, and I reach down to rub my clit.

“I know you’re going to come,” Axel says, his breath ragged. “I can hear it in your moans. Come hard, Emily. I want you to scream for me.”

I nod wordlessly, my whole body tightening, clenching until there’s nothing but the feeling of Axel’s cock...nothing but his body slamming against mine...nothing but pure, wild pleasure. Then, with a scream, my world explodes.

“I’m coming!” I sob, grabbing wildly at the counter, my nails dragging against the surface. “I’m coming—oh, God!”

My orgasm crashes over me, setting my nerves alight, every inch of me pulsing and throbbing and sobbing with glorious release. From somewhere far away, I hear Axel cry out, his warm cum spurting into me, marking his territory. Because I am his territory. Only his.

I'm still catching my breath when Axel pulls out of me. I feel like I can hardly move. My body has collapsed against the counter, my limbs like Jell-O. I feel something warm wiping between my legs, cleaning me up, and finally I feel Axel's strong arms encircling me.

"Come here, you."

He pulls my limp body into his arms and carries me into the living room, his eyes fixed on my face. He's looking at me like I'm the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. And I have a feeling that I'm looking at him exactly the same way.

"You're so beautiful. You know that?" he asks.

I feel my cheeks warm, and I give him a dazed smile. "Even though I'm a brat?"

He chuckles. "Some people would say it adds to your charm."

"Does 'some people' include you?"

"You know damn well it does," he says, sitting down on the couch and pulling me onto his lap like I'm weightless. I'm definitely not. My curves aren't just for show, after all. But he doesn't even seem to notice my weight on top of him. Instead, he just keeps on looking at me, running a hand down my face like he wants to memorize my skin by touch.

I love you.

The words don't reach my mouth, but they're in my head, circling around as I look into Axel's deep blue eyes.

I love you so much.

It hits me then. The unfairness of it all. Why couldn't he be someone else, anyone else...just not my dad's best friend. Why does the man I've fallen totally in love with have to be

the one man on earth who is totally off-limits? Why does this infuriating, bearded grump have to be so damn lovable?

“What are you thinking about?” Axel asks, finally breaking the intense silence between us.

I'm thinking about how much I love you. How much I want you. How much I wish you weren't my dad's best friend.

“Uh...I was just thinking about whether or not the red velvet cake will be cool by now.”

Axel raises his eyebrows. He knows I'm lying, but thankfully he doesn't push it. “We can go and check if you want.”

“I'd like that.” I smile at him and lean forward to give him a lingering kiss, silently wishing that this day could last forever. I don't want Monday to come. I don't want this to end.

We head back into the kitchen where I start frosting the red velvet cake with the cream cheese frosting I made, sandwiching the two sponges together and frosting the top layer until it's all ready.

“It looks awesome,” Axel says, marveling at the cake. “You're an amazing baker, Emily.”

“You helped. But don't speak too soon. We haven't tasted it yet.”

Axel cuts us two generous slices, and we eat them on the couch. The cake is delicious: sweet and moist and fluffy.

“Damn,” Axel says, grabbing our clean plates. “I think that was your best yet. Even better than the ones you make at the bakery.”

When we've finished our cake, we cuddle up on the couch, melting into each other's arms like we belong there. We talk about everything and nothing while some rom-com plays on TV in the background. Axel strokes my hair, holding me close, and as the day draws on, I notice the way we both shoot nervous looks at the clock every now and again. Every hour that passes is an hour closer to the time I have to leave. I wish I could stay here forever with Axel. Now that I know what

being with him is like, I never want to leave his side. Our weekend together has been like a dream...but nobody can live in a dream forever, and as Monday inches closer and closer, my heart sinks lower and lower.

All too soon, it starts to get dark out. Axel makes dinner for us both, and then we shower together, making love under the roaring hot water, taking our time, and exploring each other in every way. It's like we both know it's all about to come to an end.

“Good night, Emily,” Axel says once we're finally in bed together.

I never knew I could feel so happy and so sad all at once. I've had the best days of my life with Axel, and I couldn't be happier about that. But now it has to end, for my dad's sake. And it breaks my heart.

“Good night, Axel.”

With one last lingering kiss, we close our eyes. I think it's a long time before either of us get any sleep.

* * *

The next morning, my alarm goes off early, and I hurry to shut it off, not wanting to wake Axel. I have to get to work, but I take a minute just to look at him. Even when he's asleep he's frowning slightly, and I smile at him sadly before I finally force myself to get out of bed and throw on my outfit from Saturday. I don't have time to go get a change of clothes, so the black dress will have to do. With a last look at Axel, I leave the bedroom and scribble a quick note in the living room, leaving it on the table for him to find later. My heart is heavy as I open the front door and step out in the cold winter morning, the crisp mountain air hitting me like a bucket of cold water. I get into my car and drive down the mountain path toward the bakery, trying my hardest not to cry.

Norma has already come and gone by the time I get to work. She's left me a note asking me to cover for her, and I start opening everything up, getting ready for the day ahead. I wish

more than anything that I was still in bed with Axel, but I have a job to do.

I hear the door barge open as I'm wiping down the tables, and I call out over my shoulder, "Sorry, we're not open yet. You can come back at 8 if you—" I turn around and my voice dies in my throat.

Mike Payne is striding into the bakery, his face fierce and angry. I take a deep breath and hurry behind the counter, trying to put as much space between us as possible.

"You're not allowed in here, Mike," I say, trying to sound calm. "Leave."

My voice betrays me. There's a wobble in it, and it makes Mike sneer.

"You're not so brave now that your boyfriend's not here, are you?"

He takes a step forward and I raise my hands as if that will stop him in his tracks. "Take another step, Mike, and I'll call the police."

He scoffs. "And say what? That there's a customer in the bakery?"

"No, I'll say you're harassing me. That's exactly what this is. Harassment. Intimidation."

"Intimidation," Mike snaps, "is what your *boyfriend* did to me last time I was in here."

"He's not my boyfriend."

Mike's face splits into a sly smile that makes my stomach turn. "You're a bad liar, Emily. I've seen you with him. I saw you go to his house on Saturday. I didn't see you leave until this morning."

My mouth goes dry as I take in what he just said.

"Have you been following me?" I shriek.

Mike shrugs. "It's a free country. I can do what I want." He looks me up and down with disgust on his face. "You act like

you're so innocent. When really, you're just a whore who likes fucking guys twice her age."

"Fuck you," I snap. "You're pathetic. All I did was tell you to stop bothering me. Is your ego really so fragile that you've resorted to spying on me to feel better?"

I'm shaking with anger, my fear replaced with pure-hot rage as I stare at Mike's smug face. I want nothing more than to vault over the counter and strangle him until that horrible smile is wiped away.

"Hey, come on now," he says, raising his hands in mock surrender. "Easy. There's no need to be mad. I'm here to make you an offer."

That damn smile is still there, and I know whatever he's about to say can't be anything good. Instinctively, I reach beneath the counter for a rolling pin, wrapping my palm around the handle.

"What could you possibly have to offer me?" I ask, holding the rolling pin behind my back.

Mike sighs dramatically, looking off into the distance like he's pretending to think. "Well, how about this? I promise I won't go over to the garage tell your dad all about how you've been fucking his colleague behind his back. All you have to do is give me a little compensation."

My mouth drops open. "Compensation?"

Mike nods, smirking at my shocked expression. "Money. Or maybe something a little more...physical." His eyes drop to my breasts and I feel like I'm going to vomit all over the counter.

"Let me get this straight," I say, trying to wrap my head around his words. "You're saying that if I don't give you money...or *sleep* with you...you'll tell my dad that you saw me stay over at Axel's cabin?"

Mike nods his head at me. "Well done. You're a fast learner."

“So, you’ve added blackmail to your list of hobbies?” I snap, trying to hold back tears as I look into those cold eyes. “Stalking and harassing women isn’t enough for you, you disgusting piece of shit.”

Anger flickers across Mike’s face, and he takes another slow step toward me, scowling at me. He looks crazed. Dangerous. I tighten my grip around the rolling pin and take a deep breath.

Bring it on, asshole.

Axel

From the second I wake up, something feels wrong. I blink away the sleep from my eyes and immediately turn to look at Emily, but her side of the bed is empty, and the unease in my chest deepens. I jump out of bed and hurry into the living room, checking the kitchen and bathroom. But she's gone. There's a piece of paper on the living room table, and I grab it, scanning it quickly.

Good morning, grumpy!

I have to get to work, and I didn't want to wake you.

Thank you for the best weekend ever.

I'll see you later when you come in for your espresso.

Emily xo

Her note makes me smile, but the unease in my chest is still there. Being away from Emily feels wrong. Strange. Every instinct is telling me to go and see her right now. The bakery won't be open yet, but I don't care. I'll force myself in if I have to—I just need to make sure she's okay. Safe.

I throw on some clothes as fast as possible and hurry out the door, jumping behind the wheel and heading down the mountain path. I can see a set of tire tracks in the snow, no doubt Emily's, and suddenly I get an image of her car slipping on an icy patch of road and rolling down the mountain. The thought makes my heart start to thud with anxiety. I can't explain the fear that's consuming me, but I know I won't feel calm again until I see her.

I head past the stop sign where Emily rear-ended me and drive along Winterdale's main street, parking outside the garage. The engine has barely stopped before I jump out of my truck and hurry across the street toward Sweet Tooth Bakery, my shoes crunching in the freshly-fallen snow. The door to the

bakery is slightly ajar. I frown, pushing it open fully and striding inside.

It takes me a moment to realize what I'm seeing. Mike Payne is rounding the cake counter, getting closer and closer to Emily who's glaring at him, holding something behind her back. Mike's expression is twisted with anger and instinctively, I get ready to run at him.

"Hey!" I yell.

Mike whips around to look at me, startled, but before he can say a word, there's a loud *thwack*. Emily is hitting Mike with a rolling pin, swatting at him like he's a fly, battering every inch of him she can reach.

"Ow!" Mike cries. "Get off! Get off me!"

I watch with raised eyebrows as Emily's rolling pin catches Mike square in the face, and his nose starts streaming with blood.

"Ow!" he cries, his voice thick and muffled, the words distorted. "You boke my fugging nose! Stob it!"

Mike collapses onto the floor cradling his bloodied face, and only then does Emily stop wielding the rolling pin. She looks like a warrior, her hair wild, a sheen of sweat covering her face as she looks down at Mike with disgust. I take my chance. I stride across the bakery and kneel beside Mike's trembling body. He looks dazed and pathetic, his nose still bleeding heavily. I pin him to the floor, pressing a threatening arm against his throat.

"Winterdale has had enough of your shit, Mike," I snarl. "You've hurt my girl for the last time. This is your final chance to get out of Crave County and never come back, or I swear to God you'll be leaving here in a damn coffin. Do I make myself clear?"

Mike is silent for a moment and I increase the pressure on his neck, making him gasp.

"I said, do I make myself clear?"

Mike nods reluctantly, his eyes full of hatred and fear. He knows I'm not bluffing. He knows I mean every word. He gets up, unsteady on his feet, holding a hand to his bleeding nose as he stumbles toward the door and leaves without looking back.

When he's gone, I immediately run to Emily, pulling her into my arms.

"Are you okay? Fuck, did he hurt you?"

Emily shakes her head. "No. I got him pretty good, though."

I fight back a grin. "Yeah, I saw that. I came to rescue you. Looks like you did a pretty good job of that by yourself."

Emily gives me a satisfied smile, twirling the rolling pin in the air and catching it. "A girl does what she has to do." Her smile wavers for a moment as she continues, "He's been watching me. Mike. He saw me going to your cabin."

"Watching you?" I ask. It feels like I just swallowed a cube of ice. "You mean he's been stalking you?"

Emily nods, her eyes full of fury. "He said he would tell my dad about us unless I gave him money...or sex."

I see red. My fists clench and I wheel around, ready to follow that bastard and break him in half, but Emily runs toward the door and blocks my exit.

"Axel, don't," she pleads. "I don't want you getting into trouble because of that...that *thing*. Please, just stay here with me. I need you."

My heart is still pounding, my face contorted with anger. "What if he comes back?"

Emily shakes her head. "He won't come back. I think he got the message this time. He knows he'll get worse than a broken nose if you see him around again."

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my rage, but it's still sizzling red-hot in my veins. "I'll stay. For you. But I swear Emily, if I see that guy one more time, I'll get him. You won't be able to stop me next time."

Emily breathes a sigh of relief and nods. “If there is a next time, I won’t try to stop you.”

I nod, turning away from the door and running a hand through my hair. “Fuck, seeing him looking at you like that, walking toward you like he wanted to hurt you...I’ve never felt so fucking angry.”

Emily’s gaze softens and she sets down the rolling pin, taking a step toward me. “I know. But you make me feel safe, Axel. You make me feel strong and brave, like I can take on the whole world.”

I reach up to cup her cheek, staring into those bright brown eyes until everything else disappears and it’s just me and Emily.

“All I want is to protect you,” I tell her, my voice serious. “I care about you more than anything else in the world. You know that, don’t you?”

She nods, her face full of affection as she smiles at me. “I know. I feel the same way, Axel.”

I swallow down the rising emotion, trying to keep my voice steady. “It’s more than just caring about you, Emily. It’s so much more than that. I’m in love with you. I love you. You know that, right?”

Her eyes are glittering with tears, and she beams at me. “I love you too, Axel. I love you so much.”

I lean down to kiss her, capturing her sweet, soft lips between my own. Her body melts against mine, her hands tangling in my hair as our mouths move urgently, our lips parting, tongues meeting...

We don’t hear the door open. But we hear the shout.

“WHAT. THE. FUCK?”

Emily and I spring apart and whirl around to face the door where Gregor is standing, looking at us. He looks betrayed, confused, shocked beyond belief...and above all, he looks damn furious. My stomach drops to my knees, and I hear Emily gasp from beside me.

Shit.

Emily

I can hardly breathe as I turn and see my dad standing in the doorway, glowering at Axel. I've never seen him look so mad. The rage on his face makes my whole body turn to ice. I feel totally frozen. Before I can say a word, my dad strides toward us. I realize what's going to happen a second too late. He draws his fist back in one quick motion and punches Axel hard in the face. Axel stumbles but stays on his feet. My dad's fist draws back again, but this time I'm ready for it. I jump in front of Axel.

"No!" I cry. "Dad, please, no. Stop."

My dad still isn't looking at me. Even though I'm standing right in front of him, his eyes are fixed on Axel. He looks livid.

"What the fuck is going on?" my dad growls. "I come in here to see my daughter and the first thing I see is you two... *kissing*."

Axel rubs the bridge of his nose, scowling at my dad. "I deserved that, but hit me again and I'll hit you right back, asshole."

If possible, my dad's face gets even angrier. He looks almost apoplectic with rage. "You think you can kiss my daughter and then call me an asshole? Is that what you think?"

"Dad, look at me," I plead, tears blurring my vision. "You don't understand. Let me explain."

My dad finally rips his eyes from Axel and looks at me. He softens a little when he sees that I'm crying. "You're right, baby," he says. "I don't understand. So tell me, what the hell is going on?"

"I love him." Tears stream down my face as I take my dad's hands in mine, trying to make him understand. "Please, dad,

don't be mad. I know he's your best friend, and I really wish things were different. But I love him so much."

My dad's anger is replaced with shock. His jaw goes slack as he stares at me, his voice low as he asks, "What the hell are you talking about? What do you mean you love him?"

"She means we're in love, Gregor," Axel says, reaching out to rest a hand on my dad's shoulder. My dad ducks away from his touch, and Axel sighs. "I never wanted to hurt you. You're my best friend—always have been. But I love Emily with all my heart, and I can't help how I feel."

My dad stares at us both like we're speaking a foreign language. "How long has this been going on for?"

"Only the past week or so," I tell him gently, hoping the softness in my voice will soothe the shock a little. "But I've loved him for much longer than that, Dad. I've never loved anybody but him."

My dad looks at Axel. "And you? How long have you been in love with my daughter?"

"Since she came home from college." Axel looks guilty but resolute. "I didn't want to fall for her, and I did everything I could to bury my feelings. But I just couldn't. I love her too much."

"Jesus fucking Christ." My dad looks like he's about to fall over, and he collapses down onto a chair, his head in his hands. There's silence for a moment before his head snaps back up and he cries, "He's twice your age, Emily! He's the same age as me for Christ's sake. Old enough to be your damn father!"

"I know that, Dad," I say quietly. "But I don't care. I still love him. I'll always love him, and there's nothing you can say that will change that."

He groans like he's in pain and looks back at Axel. "I don't know what to say to you. I don't know what the fuck you think you're doing..."

The anger is gone now. In its place is betrayal. Bewildered, uncomprehending betrayal. It's so much worse than the anger,

and I can see the guilt on Axel's face as he looks at my dad. But he doesn't back down. He takes my hand in his and looks my dad in the eye.

"I love her, Gregor. Nothing can change that. You know me better than anybody. You know I've never been interested in love before. Emily has changed my whole life and I'm not letting her go. It would break me to lose you, buddy, but she comes first for me. She always will."

My dad is silent for a long time, staring at nothing, thinking. Eventually, he stands up and looks at us.

"I need time to think things over," he says, his voice hoarse. "A minute ago, I thought I knew you both better than anybody, and now you're confessing your fucking love for each other. I feel like I've walked into some crazy nightmare." He lets out a frustrated sigh before continuing. "I'm not opening the garage today. I'm having the day off. I need to figure out what the fuck is going on."

I look at my dad, the big strong mountain man who raised me as a single parent when my mom left, the man who loved and protected me, the man who brushed my hair every morning and told me stories to help me sleep at night, the man who kissed every scrape and bruise to make it better, the man who taught me to ride a bike, how to chop wood, and how to make a mean lasagna. The man who paid my college fees and bought me my first car, the man who cried at my graduation, the man who has my date of birth tattooed on his chest. My hero since the day I was born. I run to him and throw my arms around him, unable to stop my tears from flowing.

"I love you so much, Dad," I tell him through my sobs. "Please say you still love me too."

He looks at me, his eyes shining with tears. "I love you more than you will ever know, Emily. All I've ever wanted is for you to be happy. You know that, baby."

I nod, filled with relief at his words. "I know. And I promise you, Axel makes me happy."

My dad sighs and rubs my shoulder. “Give me time. We’ll talk about it, okay?”

“Okay, dad.”

He ruffles my hair, takes one last look at Axel, and then leaves the bakery, the door swinging closed behind him. There’s silence for a moment, before Axel says, “I’m proud of you, Emily.”

I turn to smile at him through my tears, letting him scoop me up into his arms. He holds me like that for a while, letting me cry. I can’t stop the emotions flooding through me: guilt, relief, shock, but mostly love. So much love, for Axel and for my dad.

“It’s okay, baby,” Axel murmurs, wiping away my tears with his shirt. “It’s going to be okay.”

I nod, pulling away to look at him and gently touch the place where my dad punched him. “What about you? Will you be okay?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll have a pretty ugly black eye soon, but it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“Because you’re so big and brave and strong?” I ask.

“Obviously.”

I smile slightly, but it slides straight off my face when I see Axel wince beneath my touch, looking like he’s in pain. “I’m sorry he hit you, Axel,” I say. “I wasn’t expecting it.”

Axel chuckles humorlessly. “I was. I saw it coming a mile away, but I let him get a punch in. I figured I earned it. It’s not your fault, honey.”

“It kind of is.”

Axel smirks. “You’re right, it is. If you weren’t so sexy and irresistible, none of this would have happened.”

“I could say the same to you,” I say, holding back a smile. My tears are starting to dry, but my voice is thick and stuffy from crying.

“Well, all that matters is that he knows now,” Axel says. “And honestly, it could have gone a lot worse.”

I nod. “You’re right. God, I wish he hadn’t walked in on us kissing, though. I’m surprised he didn’t have a heart attack. Poor Dad.”

“I think he’ll come around once he gets used to the idea.”

I never imagined that my dad would accept Axel and me being together, but his reaction today filled me with hope. Apart from punching Axel in the face, which definitely wasn’t what I was hoping for, my dad seemed to listen to what I had to say. He told me he loved me, and he said that he would take time to consider it. Suddenly, everything that once seemed impossible is starting to feel within reach. I wrap my arms around Axel’s neck and wipe away the last of my tears, laughing to myself.

“What’s so funny?” Axel asks, smiling at me.

“I’m just so relieved! I think that maybe...*maybe*... everything’s going to be okay.”

Axel kisses me before setting me down on the floor. “I think you could be right, honey.”

I beam at him before something distracts me: there’s a small puddle of blood on the floor left behind by Mike’s nosebleed

“Damn,” I mutter, “this is the most dramatic Monday morning I’ve ever had, and the bakery’s not even open for the day yet.”

“I guess we better open it then.”

I look at Axel. “What do you mean ‘we’?”

He grabs some paper towels from behind the counter to clean the mess on the floor. “You heard your dad. He’s not opening the garage. I have the day off, so it looks like we’re running this bakery together today.”

I smile at his suggestion, relieved that he doesn’t have to go. “That sounds like a pretty great idea. Maybe we can make a red velvet cake again.”

“Sure,” Axel says, throwing the soiled paper towel in the garbage before pulling me close to him. “And maybe I’ll fuck you while the cake’s cooling again.”

I gasp, pretending to look offended. “You’re so unprofessional! This is a workplace, Mr. Dean.”

“We’ll see about that,” Axel growls under his breath, before grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the back room.

“Axel, it’s nearly opening time!”

He grins at me, his eyes full of lust. “Then I guess we’re opening the bakery a bit later today.”

“I’m supposed to be working,” I protest. But my heart’s not in it. I gladly let him drag me into the back room, giggling with anticipation as he closes the door behind us.

“I think a couple of orgasms will make you work better,” Axel says, pressing me up against the wall of the backroom. “Don’t you?”

Well, how can I argue with that?

1 Week Later

My heart thuds with anticipation when I hear the knocking on my cabin door. Emily's earlier than I thought she'd be, and I hurry to answer the door, ready to pull her into my arms and kiss her senseless. Even though I saw her this morning at the bakery, I still miss her whenever we're not together.

I open the door, but it's not Emily. It's Gregor. I try not to let my surprise show. Gregor has been avoiding me all week. He hasn't tried to interfere with things between me and Emily, but he's been ignoring me at the garage. I was starting to think this was the end of our friendship, and as hard as that is to accept, I knew having Emily in my life made the sacrifice worth it. But here he is at my doorstep, looking at me warily.

"Nice black eye," he says.

"Thanks. Some asshole punched me."

Gregor almost smiles. "Can I come in?"

"Of course."

I usher him into the living room. There's a pair of Emily's panties hanging off the arm of the couch from our night together yesterday, and I quickly grab them and stuff them into my pocket before Gregor can see.

Gregor sits down at the table and I sit across from him, watching him, trying to figure out if he's here to try and beat me up. He seems to read my mind.

"Relax, I'm not gonna hit you again."

Well, that's a good sign.

"Why are you here if it's not to hit me?" I ask.

Gregor grinds his teeth together, trying to find the right words. "I've been thinking things over. You and Emily."

I nod. "I appreciate that you're giving it some thought."

He raises his hand to silence me. "Yeah, yeah, shut up and let me talk."

Normally, with Gregor, I like to give as good as I get. But I think now is a good moment to stay quiet and let him speak. Despite everything, I know Gregor has been totally blindsided by walking in on me kissing Emily, and I'm grateful that he's even trying to talk to me. I'm also grateful that he didn't fire my ass on the spot, which is what I was expecting when I walked into the garage on Tuesday morning.

"I've been thinking it over," Gregor continues, "and I won't pretend that I like it. I won't pretend that I'm happy about it. But I accept it. I accept that you love my daughter and that she loves you, and I accept that you make her happy. And maybe, with time...fuck, with *lots* of time...I'll be able to feel more positively about it."

It's more than I ever could have hoped for. I want to reach across the table and pull my buddy into a hug, but I have a feeling he's not ready for that kind of affection just yet. So instead, I grab his shoulder and say "Thank you. You have no idea what that means to us. Especially Emily."

Gregor nods. "I know. But that's not all I wanted to say." He leans across the table, his voice low. "I need you to know that if you do anything to hurt my daughter in any way, you'll have me to answer to. I don't care how long we've been buddies for Axel. Hurt her and I'll kill you."

"I know. I wouldn't expect anything less. But I will never hurt her, Gregor. I love her. I'd rather die than hurt her."

"Well, for your sake, I hope that's true."

He looks at me for a moment longer, like he's trying to figure out how sincere I am. He must approve of what he sees because he nods decisively and reaches out a tattooed arm across the table, holding out his hand to me. I shake it, unable to hide my grin.

“Thank you. You won’t regret this, buddy. There’s just one other thing I wanted to ask.”

Gregor crosses his arms, raising an eyebrow. “What?”

“I want to ask your daughter to marry me.”

Gregor’s eyes go wide, and for a moment it looks like he’s going to fall off his chair. “You’re gonna do *what?*”

“I’m going to ask her to marry me,” I repeat. “I’d like your blessing, but I’m going to ask her either way.”

“Well, fuck,” Gregor says. He’s quiet for a long time, and part of me worries that he’s about to storm out and never come back. But instead, he says, “I guess you really are serious about her.”

“More serious than I’ve ever been about anything.”

He sighs deeply. “You know, I’ve spent my whole life fearing the day when my daughter would get married. I always worried she’d end up tying herself to an asshole. Some good-for-nothing son-of-a-bitch who would hurt her or made her feel bad or wouldn’t treat her right. Or maybe the guy would end up leaving her, abandoning her just like her mom did. It could break her, and I wouldn’t be able to do anything to stop it. Fuck, I’ve been dreading it.” He looks at me then, and I swear I almost see a smile playing on his lips. “If you marry Emily, it’s gonna take a lot of getting used to. But at least I’ll know she’s with someone trustworthy. A good man, a man who will take care of her. You may be a grumpy bastard, Axel, but I believe that you’ll look after my Emily. I believe that you’ll treat her right. So yes. You have my blessing. Reluctantly, maybe. But you have it.”

This time, I don’t settle for a slap on the shoulder. I get up from my seat and pull my old friend into a hug, slapping him on the back. “I’ll spend my life trying to make her happy, Gregor. You have my word.”

He pulls away from me with a nod. “You better.”

But he’s smiling a little like he truly believes his daughter is in safe hands. He looks almost relieved.

At that moment, there's a knock on the door.

"It's open!" I call.

Emily walks inside, stopping in her tracks when she sees me and Gregor standing together.

"Oh, God, you haven't been fighting again, have you?" she asks, looking around like she's expecting to see a huge pool of blood and missing teeth strewn across the floor.

"No, honey, we're not fighting," Gregor says. "Just discussing a few things." He heads toward the door, patting Emily on the shoulder as he passes her. "I have to get home. I'll see you both later."

"Bye, Dad," Emily says, beaming at him affectionately.

"Bye, honey." Gregor puts his hand on the door handle, ready to leave, before he turns around and says, "Oh, I almost forgot. I heard some news that I think you'll be interested in."

"Yeah?" I ask.

"Mike Payne," Gregor continues. The name automatically makes my fists tighten. "He skipped town last week. Headed down to New Mexico where he got himself arrested for drunk driving. Turns out he has a whole list of convictions in multiple states: assault, theft, stalking, sexual harassment, blackmail, you name it. He's been hiding from the law for the last couple of years, but now they've got the bastard. Sounds like he'll be going away for a very long time."

Emily makes a sound of relief, grinning at me. "That's great news. I'm so relieved I'll never have to see that creep again."

"I don't think he'd dare show his face around here anyway," I say, smiling at her. "Not now that he's seen what you can do with a rolling pin."

She laughs, the sound making my heart stir with love for her. My beautiful Emily.

"Anyway, I figured you might like to know," Gregor says, raising his hand in a parting wave. "See you later."

We say our goodbyes, and he closes the door behind him. As soon as he's gone, Emily runs to me, her arms outstretched, and I scoop her up, holding her close.

"I missed you today," she says, planting a sweet kiss on my lips. "What did my dad want?"

"Well...he told me that he accepts our relationship." I grin at my own words. "He says it will take him a long time to get used to it, but that we have his blessing."

Emily beams at me, but she doesn't look surprised. "He told me the same thing this morning. I've been wanting to tell you all day, but he told me not to. He said he wanted to speak to you himself, but I was worried he just wanted to come over and punch you again. Was that all you talked about? Him accepting our relationship?"

I smile, thinking about the engagement ring hidden at the back of my closet. "Yep. That was all we talked about."

She squeezes me tight, her mouth stretched into a wide grin. "I'm so relieved! I never thought he'd accept us being together."

"I guess he just wants you to be happy. And he can see that I make you happy."

Her eyes are full of love as she stares up at me. "Yes. You do make me happy, Axel...even though you're bossy and have resting grump face."

I frown. "What's resting grump face?"

"It's the face you're pulling right now!" she says, pointing at me. "All frowny and annoyed-looking."

"Is that so?" I ask, raising an eyebrow. "Well, if I have resting grump face then you have resting brat face?" Emily rolls her eyes, and it's my turn to point at her. "There it is. Resting brat face. Eye-rolling, smirking, that teasing look in your eye when you're trying to annoy me."

Emily laughs, and I capture her open mouth in a kiss, hungry for her taste.

"I love you," I say as I pull away. "More than anything."

“I love you too, Axel.”

* * *

I wait until the next morning, a plan forming in my mind. I watch Emily sleeping beside me until finally, her eyes flutter open.

“We’re going out,” I tell her.

She blinks sleepily at me. “Well good morning to you too.” She mutters something under her breath that sounds a lot like “bossy”, and I hold back a smile.

“Come on. I’m taking you for a walk.”

Emily snorts. “I’m a woman, Axel, not a dalmatian.”

I roll my eyes, but secretly, I get a kick out of her smart mouth. Before she can protest, I pull her out of bed, scooping her up into my arms.

“Come on, no excuses. I’m going to cook us some breakfast and then we’re heading up to Snowfall Point.”

Emily pretends to look irritated, but I see the gleam in her eyes when I mention Snowfall Point. It’s the most gorgeous viewpoint on the whole of Frozen Peak. You can see for miles, and it feels like you’re on top of the world.

“Fine, I’ll get dressed.” I set her down on the floor and she puts her hands on her hips. “But may I ask why you’re dragging me halfway up the mountain first thing on a Sunday morning?”

“No, you may not ask.” Before she can protest, I kiss her hard on the lips. As I pull away, I tell her, “It’s a surprise.”

Emily looks intrigued, and she dutifully gets dressed into her warmest clothes. After breakfast, I fill up a couple of thermos flasks—coffee for me, cocoa for Emily—and we head out the cabin door.

It snowed overnight. The mountain is coated in a thick layer of white powder, making it look like a gorgeous winter wonderland. I take Emily’s hand and we walk up the mountain path. Luckily, Snowfall Point isn’t far from the cabin, and the

path isn't too steep, so it only takes us five minutes to get there. The viewpoint is marked by a solitary wooden post, and Emily gasps with delight as we look out at the view. The whole of Winterdale is laid before us at the foot of the mountain, its quaint stores the size of postage stamps from this far up. We can see for miles, mountains looming in all directions, capped with snow. White Spruce Lake is visible from here, its deep blue waters glittering in the morning sunlight.

"It's so beautiful," Emily says, marveling at the view. It's not the first time she's been up here, but when you're at Snowfall Point, every time feels like the first time. She's too distracted by the view to notice me taking a step back and kneeling down on one knee. My heart is thudding against my rib cage as I fumble for the ring box in my coat pocket, pulling it out and holding it toward her.

"It's not as beautiful as you," I tell her.

Emily turns to look at me with a grin on her face before her eyes slide down to the floor where I'm kneeling. Her eyes widen and her mouth drops open.

"Axel..."

I can feel snow soaking through my pant leg as I kneel, but it barely registers. All my focus is on the woman I want to marry.

"I love you, Emily," I say, my voice hoarse with emotion as I stare into her eyes. "I love you more than anything, and I'm going to keep on loving you for the rest of my life. I want you to be mine forever, baby. You're all I'll ever want." I take a deep breath, before asking the final question, the most important question I'll ever ask. "Will you marry me?"

Emily's eyes shine with tears and her face splits into the biggest grin I've ever seen. "Oh, Axel...yes! Of course I'll marry you. I love you so much."

I'm flooded with relief and happiness as I slide the engagement ring onto her outstretched finger. She reaches down to pull me up off the floor before leaping into my arms,

laughing with delight. Before I know it, I'm laughing too, spinning her around in my arms until we're both dizzy and crying and full of nothing but love.

"You've made me so happy," I tell her sincerely once we've settled down, still smiling at each other adoringly. "And damn, you look good wearing my ring."

Emily wriggles her finger inspecting the sparkling sapphire I picked out for her. "I love it. It's gorgeous."

"I was going to get a diamond, but I know blue is your favorite color."

Emily beams at me. "How do you know that?"

"You told me once. Months ago."

"And you remembered all this time?" she asks, resting her hands on my shoulders.

"Of course I did...you're the woman I love. I remember everything you say."

Emily rises on her tiptoes and gives me a hard kiss on the lips. "You're pretty romantic, you know. For a grump."

"And you're pretty sweet for a brat."

She giggles and I pull her close to me, savoring the feel of my future wife in my arms. I feel like I could burst with happiness. Emily is going to be my wife...I get to spend the rest of my life with this perfect angel. It's everything I've ever wanted.

"Come on," Emily says, pulling me away from the viewpoint. "Let's go home and celebrate!"

"Oh, I can think of a great way to celebrate."

Emily raises her eyebrows slyly and I reach to grab her, but she darts away from me, hurrying down the mountain and back toward the cabin.

"You'll have to catch me first!" she shouts teasingly.

Challenge accepted.

She's fast, but I'm faster. I catch up with her just outside the front door to the cabin, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her to me. She's breathing hard from running, and all I can think about is how I want to make her breathe like that from something else entirely.

"Caught you, princess," I mutter, pressing kisses down her neck as I pull her into the cabin with me.

"Good." Emily shoots me a naughty smile. "I like when you catch me."

I press my body against her soft curves, resting my forehead against hers. "I'm going to spend the rest of my life catching you...my sweet fiancée."

"Your fiancée," Emily repeats, her eyes brightening. "I like the sound of that."

I kiss her softly. Even now, being this close to her sets my heart on fire.

"I can think of something that will sound even better," I say, pulling away with a smile.

Emily cocks her head. "What?"

"My wife."

Epilogue

Emily

2 Years Later

“Happy Birthday to you...” we finish singing.

Hazel grins at us with delight, and babbling something as I place the mini cake I made in front of her, the number 1 piped onto it with red frosting.

“Damn, I can’t believe she’s a year old already,” Axel says from beside me. “Where did the time go?”

I nod. I can hardly believe it either. It feels like only yesterday that I gave birth to her. It was Valentine’s Day last year when our perfect little girl came into the world, and I’ve always felt it makes perfect sense that she was born on a day that celebrates love. She is *all* love.

“Tell me about it,” my dad says, watching Hazel with a smile on his face. “One minute I was holding my own little baby, and now she’s got a baby of her own!”

Hazel stares with wonder at the cake in front of her, her pretty eyes wide open. They’re exactly the same shade of blue as Axel’s, but otherwise, Hazel is me in miniature.

“She really does look exactly like you did at that age,” my dad says for the thousandth time. He can’t go a day without mentioning the resemblance, but it always makes me smile.

I lean down a little beside Hazel’s high chair. “Do you want to try your cake, sweetie?”

Hazel babbles something and before I can stop her, she plants her face straight into the cake, her little mouth working at the soft sponge.

“Well, that’s certainly one way to eat a cake,” my dad says, laughing as Hazel looks up at his voice, her face covered in frosting.

“Gapa,” she babbles, grinning at my dad.

We all freeze, staring at her. “Did she just say what I think she said?” Axel asks.

Hazel’s chubby little arm points toward my dad, her hand covered in frosting. “Gapa!”

“Oh my God, she’s trying to say Grandpa!” I cry, pressing a kiss on my daughter’s head. “Her first word!”

“That’s right, sweetheart. I’m your grandpa,” my dad says, beaming at her, a tell-tale shimmer of tears in his eyes.

Hazel giggles again like he’s just said something hilarious before diving straight back into the cake face first.

“Dammit,” Axel mutters, trying to hold back a smile. “I’ve been trying to teach her ‘dada’ all this time.”

“I’ve been trying to teach her mama,” I say with an exaggerated sigh, joining Axel on the couch. “This stinks of favoritism.”

My dad chuckles. “I can’t help it that I’m the best Grandpa in the world.” There’s a satisfied smile on his face like he’s won a prize.

“I guess I can’t argue with that,” I say.

It’s true, my dad really is the best Grandpa in the world as well as the best dad. He’s crazy about Hazel, and she’s crazy about him too. When I gave birth to her, my dad was always there to help us out. It took him a while to fully accept my relationship with Axel, but he’s embraced the little family we’ve created together with open arms. I think he’s secretly relieved that I married Axel, a man that he knows is good and kind and who will always take care of me. Though, naturally, the two of them are always teasing each other about being father and son-in-law.

“Well, I have to get back to the garage honey,” my dad says, getting off the couch and kissing Hazel on her frosting-

covered cheek. "I'll see you soon."

"Sounds good, Grandpa," Axel says. "Sure you don't need any help getting back to your truck?"

His teasing earns him a playful slap on the arm from my dad. "Watch your mouth, son."

I get up to hug my dad, and Axel gives him a firm pat on the shoulder before he says a final goodbye to Hazel and heads back out into the snow.

"I can't believe Grandpa was her first word," I say when he's gone, laughing. "I bet he's been teaching her that in secret."

Axel chuckles before getting up to stoke the fire. I love living in here in Axel's cabin...or rather, *our* cabin. It's so similar to my dad's place that it felt like home from the day I moved in.

"I think it's very fitting," he says, making sure to close the baby gate around the fireplace when he's finished. "She loves your dad."

"She sure does," I say, smiling at my daughter. The frosting situation is getting out of hand, and I grab a cloth to wipe her face. "There, honey. Good as new."

I feel Axel wrap an arm around my waist, pulling me close to him as we watch our daughter giggling and babbling. She's such a happy baby, always smiling. My heart is close to bursting with love every time I look at her, and with a smile, I turn to face my husband.

"At least she seems to love the cake I made."

Axel raises his eyebrows. "You mean the cake that *we* made."

I scoff. "I made it, you just handed me stuff and acted grumpy."

"Is that so?" Axel asks, smirking. "That's not how I remember it."

“Well, that’s convenient for you.” I try to keep up my poker face, but as usual, I can’t hold back my grin. “Okay *fine*, we both made the cake.”

“Cagg.”

Axel and I pause and turn to look at Hazel. “Did she just say —”

“Cagg,” Hazel says again. Her face is already covered with frosting again, and she’s starting to look tired.

I laugh as Axel leans toward Hazel. “Wow! Two words in one day. Grandpa and cake.” He kisses her cheek. “Well done, honey.”

Hazel nods her head, her eyes getting heavy.

“I think someone’s ready for a birthday nap,” I say.

Axel lifts Hazel into his arms, wiping her face with the cloth again before we lie her down for her nap and head back into the living room.

“I got you something,” he says, sitting on the couch and pulling me onto his lap.

I grin at him. “Really? It’s not my birthday.”

“No, but it’s Valentine’s Day. Also, it’s the day you gave birth to Hazel, which makes it your special day too.”

I smile at him as he reaches down behind the couch and pulls out a present wrapped in red paper, tied with a sparkly ribbon.

“Thank you,” I say, carefully unwrapping the gift. “This is so sweet of you—”

I cut off with a delighted gasp as I look at the present. It’s a framed photo of Axel, Hazel, my dad, and me. I’m holding Hazel in my arms, while Axel and my dad each rest a hand on my shoulder. It was taken by Hunter, a friend of Axel’s, on a beautiful summer’s day down by the lake last year. It’s perfect. All the people I love most in the world in one photo.

“I love it.” I beam at him. “You’re the best.”

Axel stares at me for a moment. He does that sometimes, just looks at me, like he can't believe I'm real. Even after two years together, he makes me feel so special. So loved. He plants a kiss on my lips, and says, "I'm glad you like it. I also got you a shit-ton of chocolate. It's waiting for you in the kitchen."

I laugh. "You know me too well."

"Of course I do," he says, cupping my cheek. "You're my wife. It's my job to know you."

I kiss him hard, letting him pull me toward him until my legs are wrapped around his back. Since having Hazel, I'm curvier than ever, but Axel still pulls me onto his lap like I'm weightless. He makes me feel sexy. Wanted.

"I love you," I say, nuzzling my head against his neck.

"I love you too, Emily. With all my heart."

Our mouths meet in a deliciously long kiss, his hands gripping my waist. I moan into his mouth, relishing the feeling of his intensity, the firm pressure of his lips, the way his beard brushes against my chin as he kisses me deeper. He's always known how to take my breath away.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

With a reluctant groan, I pull away from Axel. "Who could that be?" I ask. Axel tries to keep me locked against him, but I wriggle away. "We have to answer it, honey, it could be an emergency."

With a sigh, he lets me get up and follows me to the door. I open it and see my dad standing on the doorstep, a weird look in his eye.

"Oh, dad. Is everything okay? I thought you were heading back to the garage?"

My dad doesn't answer me for a moment. He keeps looking over his shoulder like there's a pile of treasure just behind him and he doesn't want anybody to steal it while he's not looking. There's an intensity in his eyes that I've never seen before.

Crap, I hope everything's okay.

“Listen, uh,” my dad begins. “Do you have any bandages? It’s urgent, and I don’t have any at my place.”

“Bandages?” Axel repeats with a frown. “Are you hurt?”

My dad shakes his head. “No, not me, there’s a girl...says she’s called Madison...I don’t have time to explain but she’s hurt. I need bandages. I need to get back to her.”

I hurry into the bathroom and pull out a first-aid kit, handing the whole thing over to my dad.

“Do you want one of us to come with you?” I ask worriedly. “Is she hurt badly?”

“No, you stay here,” my dad says. “I don’t think she’s hurt too badly. I have no idea what she’s even doing out here. Fuck, I have to go, I’m going to get her back to my place. Make sure she’s okay.”

My dad takes off, running faster than I’ve ever seen him run before as he heads toward his truck and speeds away down the mountain back to his cabin.

I close the door behind him and Axel looks at me, his brow furrowed. “What do you think that was all about?”

I shrug, peering out of the window toward my dad’s cabin which is just visible from here.

“I have no idea,” I say. “I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

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